“What I’m wondering is...How can you know? How can you know you’re into guys if you’ve never been with one?”

His dad’s face wasn’t mean spirited, he wasn’t trying to mock Jake’s words and yet Jake was completely thrown off guard. Panic tightened his throat as he struggled to find a way to articulate an answer. A voice that sounded very similar to Angelina Jolie hissed, What if he’s right? What if you’re just making things up again for attention? The words echoed the same ones he had overheard the doctor say to his parents after they conducted a mental exam and everything had turned out to be fine.

No, no. The Squip had been real and he wasn’t lying about his sexuality. So how could he convince his dad, who was expectantly waiting for an answer Jake didn’t have?

Jake’s usual smooth words and manner were infuriatingly absent. “It’s not a-a test trial. I do know I’m in-into guys because-because-”

“What, Jake?”

“Because I’m in a relationship with one!” He blurted out, much to the surprise of both himself and his dad.

...
“His name is uh-” Jake’s gaze darted around frantically, landing on a sole figure standing off to the side “-Michael! His name is Michael Mell.”

Notes

guESS WHO IS BACK
It's me! The author who uses ellipses and commas too much! yes the very same one who leaves her stories on vague and frustrating endings
:)
I am still trash surprise surprise, and i am churning yet another pile of trash except this one will not have the squip in it and thus should not be as angsty but knowing me :D
But then, well...His parent’s house had burnt down.

After the Squip incident, things drastically changed between Jake Dillinger and his parents.

Before it all, they had barely been present in their house, much less his entire teenage life. It wasn’t "okay" with Jake exactly, but what would he do to change it? Actually bring it up, and lose the chance to bring people over or have bombass parties whenever he wanted? Not likely. Sure, sometimes, he wished that there was someone to attend his basketball games or-Well, he ended up being pretty glad they didn’t show up to his first and probably only play. His best friend, Rich Goranski, always cheered him on in the stands loud enough for two people anyway.

But then, well...His parent’s house had burnt down. It had taken every drop of the persuasive power Jake was born with to convince them not to press charges against the “Goranski kid.”

As a result of the arson event, a couple things happened. Jake’s parents didn’t really like Rich, none of his friends were allowed over anymore and, most importantly, they took an active role in his life.

The first time he heard his dad screaming hoarsely for him to make a fast break, Jake had froze right there on the court in the middle of the game, teammates and enemies flying past him. Despite the ball being stolen right out of his still hands and Jake receiving one hell of a rebuke from his coach because of it, the entire time the smile never fell from his face. In the end, he had definitely succeeded in making his parents proud. Thirteen steals, twenty seven fast breaks and a total of sixty seven points that boosted the team far ahead caused Jake’s dad to nearly lose his voice by the end.

Afterwards, they had gone out to dinner to celebrate.

“I never knew you were so goddamn good at the game.” His dad grinned at him, causing Jake to copy it in such a way his cheeks hurt. “And I had no idea they employed blind refs.”

“Honey, please,” His mom remarked, laying a hand lightly on his shoulder. “You had your hour and a half of yelling at the referees, and I know for certain that they don’t employ deaf ones.”

Never before had Jake smiled so much at both his parents, in the same room, at the same time. Near the end of the dinner though, the topic did took a somewhat serious turn.

“Jakie,” And Jake tried to put aside for later the warm feeling his childhood nickname caused to blossom in his stomach.

“Your dad and I not only want to apologize, but actually need to apologize to you. We haven’t paid attention to you or your life like we should have. i’m sure you know that this business we’ve built from the ground up is very important.”

Jake nodded silently in understanding, used to those words. Usually the rest of the speech would go something like, "So it's okay that we can't make it to your...” Spelling bee, baseball game, science fair. That wasn't how it ended this night, however, and the moroseness released it's grip as his mom continued,

"But it is nowhere near as important as you." She reached out and grabbed his cold hand with her own warm one, giving it a tight squeeze. "It shouldn't have taken the house burning down to realize that. We’ve been absent a lot in the past but rest assured, that will be changing.” His mom’s gaze was earnest and sincere. “Even if it’s something as simple as a basketball game, we want to be there.”

And well, if anyone in school the next day claimed that they saw Jake Dillinger tearing up and
hugging his parents as they all walked out of the restaurant, he might not even deny it.

His parents hadn’t lied. Every school activity, they were present. Every sports game, they were there. Slowly, their relationship repaired and built and grew. So much that Jake felt comfortable enough to talk about two very important things with them.

The first: The Squip.

Of course, he hadn’t—couldn’t—give them all the gory details. There was no way to formulate for them, or anyone for that matter, how it’s dangerously self-deprecating words had influenced his thoughts or how he still sometimes woke up panting from a Squip-centered nightmare. Not even how it had originally taken the form of Angelina Jolie, for some undisclosed reason.

His parents hadn’t believed him, and that made sense to Jake. It sounded like something straight out of a sci-fi novel. Sometimes he felt that if it hadn’t affected other students, kids like Rich, Jeremy, Michael, Christine, he might have made it all up.

The students it happened to didn’t bring it up often either. It was more a silent bond that they all shared.

His parents ended up getting him a therapist, one who didn’t actually believe him either but was considerate enough to not admit that.

Jake used to meet with Dr. Gilt once a week and had been making so much progress that it was decreased to once every two weeks. He wasn’t comfortable admitting to anyone else that he went to a shrink, but it possessed a strange sort of freedom, almost. Jake could tell her anything that popped into his mind or was bothering him. It had to stay between those four beige walls, two labelled with encouragement posters, one with her PhD in psychology, and the third with a diagram of the brain and it’s major function.

Since telling them about that ended up working out so well, he eventually felt it was time to tell his parents the second thing: His sexuality.

That...didn’t turn out as well. Which brings us to the night of the high school art gallery.

The premise for the showing was simple. Students displayed their different works and friends, relatives, and parents could come along and look at them. Jake didn’t have any artwork to display, but he knew a lot of students who did, and as his mom put it, “What a perfect way to meet your friends and their parents!” She always seemed so estatic to do the small events with Jake that it in turn made him similarly excited.

Unfortunately, he hadn’t been feeling that way a couple hours before.

The previous night, he had come out to his parents as bisexual. He technically considered himself pan, but he reasoned that luck would be on his side if his parents even knew what that meant. So to make things easier for everyone, he had just said bi.
Their reaction wasn’t that bad, pretty decent actually. His mom’s smile seemed genuine. His dad’s forced one had to be prompted with a subtle but sharp elbow to the ribs that Jake didn’t fail to notice. The next morning, conversation between him and his dad was a little more subdued than usual, but other than that, everything else almost seemed normal. It was more than he could have asked for.

Yet as they entered the school and began the viewing, the atmosphere of the night shifted.

Jake saw the moment the question entered his dad’s eyes. He had stopped walking near the beginning to gaze at an actual professional looking painting of two unidentifiable boys embracing with a rainbow background, each color fusing into the next one. Both figures had the appearance of silhouettes; the only defining characteristics was the height. One was rather shorter than the other. It always made Jake feel like a soft light had been flicked on in his chest when he saw representations of the LGBT+ community. He moved to see who the artist was but suddenly noticed the question appearing in the eyes of his dad.

The next second he was being lightly pulled aside, staring face to face with his father.

“Son, I want to talk about—about what you told your mother and I yesterday.”

Jake nodded for him to go on.

“What I’m wondering is...How can you know? How can you know you’re into guys if you’ve never been with one?”

His dad’s face wasn’t mean spirited, he wasn’t trying to mock Jake’s words, no, he was sincerely asking. Yet Jake was still completely thrown off guard. Panic tightened his throat as he struggled to find a way to articulate an answer. A voice that sounded very similar to Angelina Jolie hissed, *What if he’s right? What if you’re just making things up again for attention?* The words echoed the same ones he had overheard the doctor say to his parents after his Squip confession, when they had conducted a mental exam and everything had turned out to be fine.

No, no. The Squip had been real and he wasn’t lying about his sexuality. So how could he convince his dad, who was expectantly waiting for an answer Jake didn’t have?

Jake’s usual smooth words and manner were infuriatingly absent. “It’s not a—a test trial. I do know I’m in-into guys because—because—”

“Because what, Jake?”

“Because I’m in a relationship with one!” He blurted out, much to the surprise of both himself and his dad.

He was almost offended when his dad raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “Really?”

Just because he wasn’t actually in a relationship with a boy doesn’t mean he couldn’t be.

“Yes, really.” From the corner of his eye he saw his mom approach them, but too late, the words were already escaping his lips. Just as she reached his side he said, “I have a boyfriend and he goes to this school.”
Jake’s mom echoed his dad’s words though with less disbelief. “Really?”

Still, his response was a repeated one of exasperation. “Yes! Really!”

His mom’s questions were fired off rapidly. “That’s great, Jakie! Is he here now? Why don’t you introduce us to him! What’s his name?”

“His name is uh—” Jake’s gaze darted around frantically, landing on a sole figure standing off to the side “—Michael! His name is Michael Mell.”

Jake knew Michael, would even go so far as to say they were friends-er, well, acquaintances at the very least. He had become closer to Jeremy post-Squip, bonded through supercomputer trauma, and since Jeremy and Michael were pretty much a package deal, Jake had also gotten to know Jeremy’s best friend.

That still wasn’t a solid excuse as to why he chose Michael as his pretend boyfriend. It was simply because in the panic of the moment, he would have settled for any boy his age he had seen. That boy just happened to be Michael.

“Michael Mell? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of him. Is he here tonight?” His mom asked. She didn’t need an answer however, already following Jake’s gaze to a dark-haired young man in a red hoodie that caused him to stand out against the fancier dressed folks milling around him. His back was turned to the Dillinger family and a pair of white headphones rested around his neck. A canvas painting was tucked underneath one arm; he seemed to be staring at something, but the only people near him were Jeremy and Christine Canigula, observing the paintings together,

“He’s tall.” She helpfully remarked.

“Yup. That’s him. My tall...boyfriend.”

Jake’s mom looked at him in expectation. “Well?”

“Well, what?” He asked, a confused expression on his face.

A small sigh escaped her. “For goodness sakes.” She grabbed both her son’s and her husband’s arms and began to pull them forward. “Let’s go meet your boyfriend!”

To say that Jake was preparing for the worst was a bit of an understatement. What would happen when his parents found out he was lying? Would they increase his amount of therapy sessions? Punish him in some way?

There wasn’t enough time to wonder about it. In a matter of seconds (Even with Jake dragging his feet as much as possible) they were all standing behind Michael.

Mrs. Dillinger tapped him on the shoulder, a wide smile already on her face.

Michael turned around, immediately looking startled and perplexed as he was met with all the members of the Dillinger family. Jake could hardly meet Michael’s questioning gaze, but he figured the very least he deserved was an apologetic smile. It came out as a grimace.

Jake just needed to figure out how to drag his parents away and tell them the truth.

“It’s so good to meet you, Michael!” Jake cringed as his mom leaned in for a hug. He wouldn’t be
able to stop her either, she was a hugger. “I can hardly believe it myself,” She began telling him, “But I only found out you were Jakie’s boyfriend tonight.”

He realized that he’d never be able to talk to Michael again after this, wouldn’t be able to look him in the eye.

“Wait, what?” Michael’s brow furrowed and he immediately looked towards Jake, who could feel his face heating up from the self inflicted embarrassment. Right before his mom turned to look at him, Jake mouthed the words I’m so fucking sorry, and could only hope Michael could read lips—and somehow also minds.

His mom glanced between the two boys. “What is it?”

A heavy breath escaped Jake as he tried to begin, “Mom, dad, liste-”

“I’ve just never heard Jake’s nickname before.” Michael cut in, before he could confess.

Jake had to do a doubletake. A smile that didn’t even looked forced had appeared on Michael’s face. “I guess Jakie never thought to tell me.”

If Jake’s parents noticed anything wrong with the conversation, they didn’t comment on it. Jake himself was having trouble forming words as Michael began charming his parents.

“Part of me thinks he’s embarrassed at the nickname.” Mrs. Dillinger said with a wink, “But I’m his mom. Embarrassing him is part of the job. Oh, how rude of me! Michael, this is Jake’s father.”

Mr. Dillinger could come across as a somewhat intimidating man, but if Michael was, he didn’t let on. Instead he firmly shook his hand with the arm not holding the painting and looked him straight in the eyes. “It’s-uh, good to meet you.” Mr. Dillinger was able to manage.

“You too, sir.”

“How-How long have you two been dating?”

“It’ll be two months next week, sir.” Michael replied without missing a beat.

Mrs. Dillinger’s hand flew to her heart. “Two months and you’re only telling us about him now?” She demanded of her son before looking back to Michael. “Why don’t you come over for dinner next week? That way we can really get to know you. You seem like a lovely boy.”

What the fuck was happening? Jake wondered as Michael brightly said, “That sounds wonderful, Mrs. Dillinger. Actually, Jake talks about how good your cooking is all the time.”

His mom’s cheeks flushed pink, obviously pleased. “Oh well, I don’t know how truthful that is, but you’re very nice to be willing to try it.”

“And brave.” His dad added with a reluctant smile, letting out an “oof” when his wife whacked him on the shoulder.

“Uh, mom and dad,” Jake interjected before the situation got any weirder, finally able to speak once more. “I was actually hoping I could look at some of the paintings with Michael.”
“Oh, of course! Good idea! You’re father and I will look around some too. You can text us when you’re ready to go.”

Before he left, Jake was pulled to the side by his mom, who was grinning ear to ear. “You’ve picked a real charmer, Jakie. Tell me what type of food he likes so I can make it.”

Wordlessly, he nodded.

“Okay, now go! Have fun with your boyfriend!”

And so he went back to his-boyfriend.

Even after he reached Michael, neither of them said anything. Instead they strolled away from Jake’s parents, shoulders almost touching, until they were out of sight. Then Michael turned to Jake with questioning eyes.

"So, dinner next week?"

Jake was actually able to laugh weakly at that, a sheepish smile on his face.

"Yeah, I'm really sorry about that, Michael."

"I don't need an apology, man," The distantly chill demeanor Jake always experienced with Michael was back, whatever show he had just witnessed quickly dropping away. "Just an explanation."

He looked around but no one was paying attention to either of them. Still, he moved a little more to the side, out of the way before replying "Yeah, that's fair." Jake took a breath and jumped right into it. "So last night, I came out to my parents as bisexual-I don't care if anyone else knows, they were the main ones, y'know?"

Michael nodded at him to continue.

"Before we cornered you, my dad ask me how I knew if I had never been with a guy." His fake boyfriend's face shifted to one of sympathy. "I basically panicked."

Jake wasn't sure if that would be good enough for Michael, who seemed to be considering it. After a couple of moments though, much to his relief, he nodded in understanding. "Okay. Makes sense." He wasn't sure what else to say after that but he ended up not needing to worry; Michael motioned him to start walking again. "We told your parents we would walk around together right?"

For the first couple of seconds there was silence; then Jake couldn't help but ask, "So you're really cool with what happened? If you're not comfortable lying to my parents, I get it-"

Michael held up a hand, cutting him short. "Dude, it's cool, don't worry about it." He paused, thinking about something before going through with the question. "I guess I'm wondering why me, though. I'm nowhere near your closest friend."

Jake winced a little as he answered. "Well, you're right. My mind immediately went to Rich, this is exactly the type of thing he would laugh at and go through with."

"But?" Michael prompted.

"But, my parents really don't like him ever since he...burned down their house."
A semi-laugh, almost like a snort, escaped Michael who tried to cover up his smile. "Yeah, you know I can kind of see their reasoning."

Jake found himself smiling along. "Right, right. So I knew that that wasn't an option. I just started searching the room as fast as I could and since you were just standing there, your name popped into my head."

"Well, consider myself honored." Michael said with a smirk.

"By the way," Jake asked, mostly to keep the conversation going. "Why were you just standing there? It didn’t seem like you were looking at any paintings."

It was the wrong question to ask. His face darkened and he avoided looking at Jake, staring straight ahead-just like he had been doing before.

“I-I wasn’t looking at anyone-I mean anything. Just thinking.”

Michael was a horrible liar but Jake figured he owed him more than one for what he did, so he decided not to press it. “I do that too sometimes. I'll just be contemplating something and I can completely lose sense of my surroundings.”

Jake was glad when Michael’s smile returned, however smaller it seemed. “Yeah, exactly.”

“So, why are you carrying that painting around? Shouldn’t it be hanging up?” Jake asked, changing the subject and gesturing with his hands to the rest of the student paintings they were passing as they walked. “I didn’t even know you painted, that’s pretty cool.”

“Thanks, not a lot of people know. I don’t really broadcast it-Except for today I guess, it was hanging up over where I was standing. But the principal decided it was promoting drug use,” Michael let out a fake sounding laugh, “So I had to take it down.”

Well that certainly piqued Jake’s curiosity. “Really? Do you think I could see it?”

Jake hoped Michael wasn’t uncomfortable with sharing his painting. He had been willing to hang it up for the entire school and their parents to see...His reasoning was confirmed when with little more than a shrug, he was handed the painting. “I guess the principal was right.” Michael said nonchalantly, “It’s not really school-safe. And it’s not even that good.”

His tone made it seem like he couldn’t really care less what Jake thought of the painting, and yet he could see Michael glancing at him as he lifted it up to the light.

“Holy shit, Michael…” Jake breathed, awed at what he saw.

The scene painted on the canvas portrayed a side view of a standing teenage boy, who bore more than a slight resemblance to the student next to Jake. They shared the same jet black hair and light brown skin tone, along with them both wearing the characteristic firetruck-red hoodie Jake associated with Michael. The teenager’s arms were resting by his sides and in his hand was a lighted joint. Smoke seemed to be pouring from the part of his light pink lips that were visible, it appeared to be so tangible that Jake felt he could disperse it with a wave of his hand. The breath of smoke started out as a thin line but ended up swirled into a thick cloud. The puff of vapor covered two silhouetted, adult-looking figures who were in obvious arguing positions; One with their arms crossed angrily and the
other with hands thrown to the side in exasperation. Instead of the stunning detail that the painted boy possessed, the curve of his hands, the apparent thinness of the joint paper, the adults seemed haphazard and blurred, as if the smoke was trying to obscure it.

For almost a minute, Jake couldn’t find the words to say. All he could do was stare at the painting, beyond impressed. “Michael,” He repeated, “This is really good. Like, insanely good. You’re-This is amazing.”

It almost hurt to tear his eyes from the masterpiece to look at Michael whose face seemed to be lightly brushed with pink blush. “Thanks. I mean-I don’t show my paintings to a lot of people so I’m not really used to the compliments, but they mean a lot. I’m glad you like it.”

“I more then like it, this really should be hanging up.”

Michael however, didn’t seem as bothered by it anymore. “Well you know, that’s okay. Maybe next year I can paint something a little less...weed-y.”

Jake chuckled. “Well I’ll definitely look out for it. If it’s anything like this, it’ll be fucking great. How long have you been painting?”

“Like ever since I was a little kid. It’s kind of turned into a-a meditative type thing. It calms me down. Do you have something like that?” He asked Jake politely.

The boy thought about it for a moment. “Not really. Well, I guess basketball, or any sport really. When I’m playing, I focus only on the game, that’s all there is.”

Michael didn’t respond for a moment and then, “Yeah, can’t relate. I suck at anything to do with physical activity.”

“Everything? Are you sure? Have you tried any school sports?”

Michael gave him an unimpressed side-look. “Let me clarify; I hate sports and running and there’s no way in hell I’m going to subject myself to that on purpose.”

Jake grinned at how righteous Michael sounded. “Bit passionate about this are we?”

“Yes! Actually, I don’t think it’s fair to the rest of us that you’re so-” His words faltered as they realized at the same time that they had reached the end of the short “gallery”, and without looking at a single painting. “We were supposed to be looking at the art.” He said sheepishly.

“Ah, well that’s okay.” Jake could feel himself slipping back into his usual smooth demeanor like it was a well-worn suit. “I’ve already found my favorite piece of art.” He pointed to the painting, only slightly reveling in how easily compliments flustered Michael.

“Okay, now we have to walk back and actually pay attention to each one.” Michael said firmly.

“Wait, every one?”

“That’s what you do at an art gallery, Jake.”
“This isn’t an actual art gallery, Michael.”

“Just shut up and walk.”
Hopefully wouldn’t be too much sweat off his back.

Chapter Summary

This was not how Michael imagined the night going.

Chapter Notes

hEYO! It's Michael's POV!
Real quick, thank you guys S O much for all the comments and kudos they were insanely nice and y'all are blessings
happy independence day to my fellow Americanos celebrating

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This was not how Michael imagined the night going.

For starters, he had begun it all with Jeremy, so he basically thought that it would go down exactly like last year. They would walk through the halls for an hour or so, laugh about the bad art, take pictures of the few really good ones, stuff their faces with everything on the hors d'oeuvre table and then end the night with their usual weekend sleepover.

That’s not what happened.

It started off normal, with Jeremy and him arriving fifteen minutes late and cracking jokes as soon as they walked in. But then Christine magically appeared and, oh boy. Jeremy transformed into a stuttering mess that could barely get a sentence out, much less a witty one. Christine didn’t seem to mind though, just like always, she was all smiles all the time. Which is why it was so hard to dislike her. Not that Michael disliked her, he just wished he could. Things might be easier that way.

As it was, he couldn’t and thus things were harder.

Michael was the one who had seen her coming towards him, pointing it out to Jeremy, who immediately froze in place. Before she could approach them, Michael pulled him to the side.

“You need to ask Christine if she wants to look at the paintings with you.”

Jeremy, who had been staring off at her in the distance, was brought back to attention by Michael’s words. “What? No way! She could-She could say no or laugh at me and-”

Michael’s face deadpanned. “Would Christine ever laugh at you?”

Jeremy seemed to contemplate it, but knowing Michael's best friend, he would come to the wrong answer, so before he could reply Michael said, “No. No she wouldn’t. So go to her now, and ask.”

“What-What about you?” Jeremy asked, a last ditch attempt, Michael was sure, to avoid having to ask his crush out.
“What about me?”

“Well I came here with you and I don’t want to abandon you and I’m your ride-”

“Seriously, Jer, just hurry up and go. I’ll be fine. We can find each other when we have to go.”

Michael felt his heart sink as the nervous smile on Jeremy’s face rose. “Okay. Okay, I’ll do it.” And so off he went, and of course Christine responded with an even brighter smile on her face. He watched as they went off together and for a second he could do nothing more than stand there.

Then the principal had stormed up to him, looking absolutely furious.

Michael had to bear witness to a whole spiel about how drugs are not tolerated in this school and neither will any progressive pro-drug painting, not to mention he had already gotten several complaints from parents and he didn’t suppose Michael would be taking care of that. His canvas was handed to him and he was told that he’d be lucky if any painting of his would be accepted on display next year. After that, he got lost inside his head. Mindlessly he observed Jeremy and Christine wander around as he did nothing but stand there by himself and clutch his painting.

Who knows how long had passed before he was approached by Jake and his parents. Who claimed he was Jake’s boyfriend. Who called the aforementioned ultimately popular student, Jakie. Who invited Michael over for dinner.

Michael wasn’t exactly sure why he had gone along with it. It was something about the panic that seemed to be broadcasting in Jake’s bright blue eyes. He noticed they looked exactly like Mrs. Dillinger’s. The mother and son also shared the same honeyed blonde hair too, both styles looking meticulously maintained.

Hopefully it wouldn’t be too much sweat off his back. At the very least he would get a free dinner out of it and, well, he could think of worse people to be fake boyfriends to.

Walking through the hallways with Jake, Michael hoped to get a better grasp of the boy. He didn’t know him well, and not at all before the Squip happened. People always seemed to be gravitating towards Jake in school; hanging around him, laughing. Not so much Michael, he really only ever had Jeremy. After the Squip though, everybody who had been affected by it sat together at the same lunch table. They all hung out at each other’s houses. Well, sometimes Michael would make an excuse so that he didn’t have to go. Not that he didn’t want to, it’s just that every now and then it would feel like he was…inserting himself. And that wasn’t a good feeling. A better one would be getting stoned in his basement. Or, at the very least, it was more quiet.

Off-topic. The point was that for a long time, Jake was like practically untouchable and then all of a sudden he wasn’t. So, slowly walking through the school hallways with him and commenting on each piece of art, bad or not, was a big change. Though not exactly an unwelcome one. The conversation between them was nice, but because of their lack of familiarity with one another, it stayed pleasantly superficial.

By the end of the night, if they had been on acquaintance terms, Michael figured it could be upgraded to friend. Jake already had his number from the group chat they were in so he’d be able to inform him about the meal plans.
It didn’t have to go past that. Michael had already assumed that they would figure out the details of the dinner over text, he would play his part, everything would go smoothly and forever after that they would be nice and polite to each other. Instead, Jake offered him a ride home.

Michael opened his mouth to say something along the lines of, *Oh no, I have Jeremy*, but then he remembered he didn’t have Jeremy and it would be rude to interrupt his best friend’s time together with his crush just because he had a ridiculous curfew of 10:00 p.m.

“Yeah, actually. That’d be great, thanks, Jake.”

As Jake called his mom, informing her that he would drop off Michael real quick and then run back to pick them up, Michael shot off a text to Jeremy.

*Found a ride w/ someone else, enjoy your time w/ christine ;)*

By the time he pocketed the phone afterwards, Jake was just about done with his call. A moment later he turned back to Michael. “Ready to go?”

It was slightly misting outside, the air warm and humid. On the way to the car, Michael was desperately searching for a conversation topic. Anything that would ensure that the awkward silence that permeated almost every conversation Michael had with other students wouldn’t infiltrate this one too.

By the time they were inside his silver prius (much nicer than his own PT Cruiser), Michael’s painting situated in the space between the two front seats and after Jake reminded Michael to buckle up, he still hadn’t thought of any subject to save him. Thanks to Jake, he didn’t need one.

As they were pulling out of the parking lot, Jake suddenly smacked his own forehead, exclaiming loudly, “Oh my god!”

“What? What is it?!” Michael asked anxiously, making sure he was securely buckled.

“I didn’t even ask if you were gay or like—if you’d be comfortable acting like it in front of my parents.”

To be fair, the worry hadn’t crossed Michael’s mind either.

“Oh don’t worry about that. Yeah, I’m gay.” To his credit, Jake didn’t take his eyes off the road, they only widened slightly.

“So whenever Rich yelled “Gay” really loudly—”

“—.He was just loudly proclaiming the truth. Still annoying though.”

Jake laughed. “Man, I wish I could be as casual as you are about it.” His voice was tinged with want. “There’s like this feeling that I have to tell everyone around me it or else it’s not—”

“Serious?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess that’s it. Do you know what that’s like? Oh and if you want to put your address in, here.” Jake handed him his phone.

Inputting his home address gave his fingers something to do while he attempted to honestly answer
the question. “Yeah, you could say that. When I first realized, like-god it was a couple years ago actually, it seemed like this dirty secret, and I thought that I needed to be honest with everyone or else.”

“How did you—How did it stop?”

Michael waited until the robotic voice of Siri filled the car, instructing them where to go, before answering.

“It took a while, but after struggling with my own thoughts for a long time I finally concluded that it wasn’t anyone’s business. If I didn’t feel like them knowing I didn’t have to tell them.” He looked over at Jake despite the fact he couldn’t look back, eyes glued to the road like a responsible driver. “It helps,” Michael continued with a small smirk, “That I didn’t have a crowd of people following me at school. I barely told anyone, by choice but also because there wasn’t really an alternative. Not that I mind.” He added quickly, hoping he didn’t sound like he was resentful of Jake. “Other than Jeremy, there wasn’t a lot of people I wanted to tell.”

“What about your parents? Do they uh-know? Is it okay if I ask that?”

“Dude, you’re fine. Uh, yeah. Yeah, I told them.”

“How did it go?”

“Good.” Michael wondered what the point was in lying. Maybe there wasn’t any. It wasn’t like he cared anymore.

“Not good.” He finished, looking out the car window as he talked. The sky was already dark, the road only illuminated by a steady line of street lamps. “There was one, big blow up argument and then it was never mentioned again.”

Right. That’s why he didn’t talk about it. The pitying silence that always came afterwards.

“I wish I could think like that,” Jake said after a while, surprising Michael for...how many times was it that night?

“Being surrounded by everybody is, nice, I guess. But now I have to wonder, are they going to still like me if I tell them? Do they even like me now or is it just the idea of me? Like how many of them are really my friends and how many of them—” He stopped in the middle of his sentence, sending an apologetic glance Michael’s way. “Jesus, I’m sorry. I must sound so full of myself. A jock complaining about being popular.”

Okay, well some small part of Michael had been thinking that, but a bigger part was taking it in stride and maybe even losing some of the jealous edge that always tainted his thoughts about the popular crowd. It didn’t sound that nice after all.

“I mean, I can’t say I can relate to what you’re saying exactly, but I can see how that would suck.” Michael offered. “When you’re, Uh—not popular, you don’t really have to worry about fake people. You do have to worry about being shoved into a locker though so…”

“It evens out.” Jake said.

“It evens out.” Michael repeated. Then he actually thought about it.

“Wait no, being bullied sucks way more. You’re complaining about being popular? You have influence over people! You can make or break their social lives!”
Jake’s laugh was louder than the automated voice telling him to turn left in half a mile. It also sounded, Michael noted, more authentic than any of his he had heard tonight. His true laugh was melodic, almost.

“Okay you—Yeah I can see your point. You won’t hear me whine about being popular any longer.”

Michael nodded, a small victorious smile on his face as though he had won something. That seemed to be the end of that conversation and Michael had not foreseen himself spilling innermost thoughts about his own sexuality like that. They were still minutes away from his house though, and in that moment Michael would have talked about any usually forbidden topic if it meant the conversation wouldn’t die.

*Think, think, think.* What could he say?

“So, how is your mom’s cooking? Yeah, turn right here.” He said, before the GPS could instruct them.

“Not bad. I think. I kind of remember some really burnt meals early in my childhood, but she’s gotten a lot better since then. Especially recently. Oh! That reminds me, she wanted to know what type of food you like so she can make it.”

That was the moment Michael felt just the slightest tinge of guilt for lying to the Dillinger’s. His mom seemed so nice.

“Okay first off, your mom sounds super dope, and, I don’t know man. Food is food. I can eat anything.”

“She likes making Italian, is that okay?”

“I can definitely do Italian.” Michael said, thinking of the small Italian restaurant close to Jeremy’s house that they always went to together to celebrate...well anything. When Jeremy got employee of the month at the grocery store he worked at, when Michael got a good grade on a test, when they got to play with a lost wiener dog for fifteen minutes before the owner found it...Okay well, *sometimes* Jeremy would make up reasons to go to the restaurant, like that last one, but most of the time they were totally legit.

Whenever they arrived there, after sitting down and being handed their menus, Jeremy would make sure to point at all the complicated Italian names and slowly pronounce them with a *very* exaggerated accent. He did it every time no matter what, and it never failed to make Michael laugh. *This is completely accurate,* Jeremy would protest as Michael loudly cracked up, *I would know, I’m eighty-nine percent Italian,* he’d claim even though they both knew he was almost completely full-blooded Polish.

Jake’s voice snapped him back to reality. “-good. I’ll tell her that then.” He was saying. Whatever guilt Michael felt doubled as he realized he had completely zoned out on Jake. Hopefully the boy hadn’t noticed it.

At last the car turned into Michael’s driveway. The house was completely dark; chances were his parents were already asleep. They hadn’t wanted to come to the art show. That was actually a good thing, if they had caught sight of his painting...

“It’s nice that you live so close to school. Do you walk?”

“Yeah, most days I do. It’s actually more enjoyable than the bus.” Michael said, thinking of the chaotic school environment that invaded even the bus to school. He unbuckled his seat belt and reached for the painting. “Thanks for giving me a ride again.”
“No problem. After all, you are my boyfriend.” Jake teased.

“Mmm,”

“No boyfriend jokes?”

“Maybe wait until after the first date.”

Once their chuckles faded, Jake’s tone became slightly more serious, though his demeanor still remained smooth as silk. “Talking about that-”

“Talking about what?”

“First dates. Do you want to hang out tomorrow?”

Michael eyes widened and his mouth almost opened before realizing that would have been very rude. “W-what?”

Somewhere in a dim corner of his mind, Michael wondered how Jake never seemed to stutter in front of anyone. Ever. Even now, Michael—or even Jeremy for that matter, would have been a mess waiting for an answer to a question like that. On second thought, they probably wouldn’t have even had the courage to ask that question. But looking at Jake, it appeared to be no big deal. He was the persona of casual.

“Well, I was thinking that since you told my parents we’ve been dating for two months, we should probably spend some more time together. You know, I realized that before tonight, we don’t really talk and since we’re going to be acting like we’re together…” He trailed off, assuming Michael was getting the gist of what he was suggesting.

“Yeah, no-I realized that.” Michael embarrassingly almost squeaked. “I’m sorry, I really shouldn’t have said that long, I don’t know what I was thinking-”

Jake held up his hands quickly in reassurance. “Seriously, don’t apologize! You completely saved my ass, I’m not complaining about a single thing.” Totally unfazed by Michael’s reaction, he smiled. “There might be slightly more reason for me to committed to this then you, which is why I suggested it. If you’d rather wing it-”

“No! No, that’s okay. I mean-yes, I can hang out Sunday. To talk about how to act for dinner.” Michael’s voice was both stilted and questioning. “It’s not-This isn’t a-”

“.Date. Not if you don’t want it to be.” Jake said with a wink. His laugh at the end informed Michael it was a joke and reminded him that he really needed to calm down. This wasn’t something to get worked up about.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Where do you want to hang out?”

“My house should be fine, my parents are going to be gone basically all day for a business meeting so we won’t have to worry about them hearing anything.” Jake noticed Michael’s shocked look and immediately started to backtrack.

“Oh my god, not like that! I meant like us talking about fake dating! Not...that.”

Michael felt like he should get out of the car.

He grabbed the painting and hauled it onto his lap, opening up the door in the next motion. Before stepping out though he had to ask, “What time should I come over?”
“Any time after noon is fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Their smiles and goodbyes were slightly awkward now, but well-meaning at the very least.

Jake didn’t back out of the driveway until he was safely inside his house, something Michael was agonizingly aware of as seconds seemed to slowly tick by while he fumbled with his keys.

Once indoors, he was able to regularly breathe again—Quietly though; he could hear his parent’s snores coming from the upstairs bedroom. With soft footsteps he entered the kitchen, refusing to think about any moment from tonight until he had food inside his stomach. After rummaging through the refrigerator and microwave, Michael headed to his room downstairs, balancing in his arms a plate of cold rotisserie chicken, two chocolate chip cookies and a bottle of Gatorade.

Michael walked into his messy bedroom already feeling tired. He managed to sidestep the scattered piles of dirty clothes littered on the carpeted floor, almost tripped over his beanbag chair because he hadn't bothered to turn on the main light and tried very hard to resist the urge to go to sleep at that exact moment.

He would have liked to flop down on the bed dramatically, but he had the food to consider. Instead he laid it down carefully on the bed and sat down next to it, turning on a bedside lamp before ripping pieces of chicken and popping it into his mouth, still ignoring the swarming thoughts in his head that were growing more insistent, demanding his attention.

After chugging down half the Gatorade bottle and devouring the cookies, he knew he should at least try and put his thoughts in order.

For starters, he was now the fake boyfriend of Jake Dillinger.

He was going to have dinner with Jake Dillinger’s parents. And also lie straight to their faces, but that wasn’t the important part.

He’d be spending a couple of hours, at the very least, with Jake Dillinger tomorrow, getting to know him.

A vibration in the pocket of his jacket managed to distract his thoughts for half a second. He took out and unlocked his phone. A couple instagram and snapchat notifications popped up, which he ignored in favor of his texts.

There were some from what he secretly thought of as the Jeremy’s Friends Group Chat, Brooke asking the rest of them if they were going to the art showing and the various yes or no’s. Rich said no, Jake said yes (obviously), so did Jeremy and Christine, the rest, including Michael, hadn’t responded.

His attention shifted to the private texts that had come in a couple minutes ago from Jeremy.

*are u sure?* And then, *who gave u a ride?*

*I’m already home n Jake did,* Michael typed back, knowing he didn’t have to specify which Jake.
He turned the sound on his phone up and as he waited for a reply, started to get ready to take a shower. It dinged as he grabbed a towel from the back of his door.

*wait jake as in jake dillinger?*

*That’s the one*

*why’d he gave u a ride?*

*Long story,* Michael typed without hitting the send button. If he said that, Jeremy would undoubtedly ask about it, and then Michael would either have to tell him or not tell him. Since he didn’t know if this was the type of thing Jake wanted known-chances were no, he decided it’d be better to keep it
on the downlow.

If only there was a surefire way to get Jeremy distracted. 
Oh, right.

Just because,,,,so how did things go with Christine??

Michael dropped the phone on his bed and went to take a shower.

Michael didn’t remember falling asleep after his shower, but he woke up lying on top of his blankets, inexplicably in his pajamas using his damp towel as a pillow. He was still laying down, still feeling groggy and even slightly grumpy when somewhere next to his head, his text message alert went off once, twice, three times. His hand fumbled around for the phone, finally grasping it’s cool metal and staring blearily at the new notifications from Jake and the ones from his last night conversation with Jeremy. Better address the newer ones.

Okay I’m hella sorry if last night’s comment threw you off, I did not mean it that way!!! That one had actually come around midnight. The next ones in line really had just arrived though,

I don’t mean to press you but I am about to die of boredom
Are you still coming over?

Michael checked the time on his phone and let out a yelp. He jumped out of bed, instantly more awake. It was 1:57 p.m.
With hurrying fingers he sent out a reply, Yup i’m on my way over now, despite the fact that not only was he currently in pajamas but also, he didn’t have Jake’s address. That was solved soon enough though when his text ringtone went up as he threw on a pair of pants of questionable clean status and a wrinkled blue shirt. (It’s not like he was going to meet the parents.)

Do you have my address?

Nope

He walked out of his already empty house, chocolate chip muffin in hand. It was a sunny day, humidity and precipitation hanging heavily in the air, frizzling up his hair, Michael was sure. After hungrily devouring his breakfast, he pulled out his phone and entered the address Jake had sent into google maps. While blindly following the automated directions, Michael read the rest of his text messages, all from Jeremy.

oh god dude u have no idea
i was so nervous the entire time right?? i could barely talk it was so bad
but then i made some stupid joke about a painting and shé LAUGHED
like i swear it was like m ú s i c and after that it actually didn’t go horribly and we talked throughout the entire thing and after got something to eat from mcdonalds
it was almost like i dare say a date
and then when we were walking out of mickey d’s she was all like i have something i want to tell you and i was like lay it all on me but tHEN HER MOM DROVE UP TO PICK HER UP AND SHE WAS LIKE okay well see you at school
i was having a stroke
yo dude
r u there
i am pouring my heart out where is my best friend to listen and comfort me

Michael smiled at that last one despite the falling feeling that had appeared in his chest as he read through the thread of messages. He should feel nothing but proud and excited for Jeremy. Unfortunately, this deep dread that always liked to settle in the pit of his stomach was a bit too familiar.

Sounds like for once u weren't a giant nerd congratulations buddy
Are u going to ask christine what she wanted to tell you next time u see her?

yes definitely and by that i mean no absolutely not
also can i come over rn? i feel like boring u with all the details

Texting Jeremy felt so normal, such a common occurrence—especially compared to the insane events of last night. That meant, however, that without even thinking twice about it, Michael was telling Jeremy how he couldn’t come over because he was currently on his way to Jake’s house.

Wait.

w h a t
your going to jakes house??

Okay first off *you’re
And secondly, yes i am

haha what r u, dating him?

I thought we agreed never to use haha unironically

don’t change the subject

No of course i’m not dating Jake freaking Dillinger
Look it’s kind of a long story but when we see each other in person we can exchange all the “boring details” of what happened on art night

It was lucky that Michael arrived at Jake’s house when he did, he had practically spilled everything. For some reason, Jeremy had that effect on him.

Chapter End Notes

As always, every single one and every single kudo is appreciated beyond belief and devoured by my validation seeking self, next chapter will definitely have rich and we might even see a little jealousy from him and Jeremy about Jake and Mike's "relationship" :) ;)
Thanks a billion,
~~~
"I’m going to go downstairs to get some ice for my burn."

Chapter Summary

Jake was definitely not nervous as Michael entered his empty house, eyes widening as they flitted from the crystal chandelier hanging above them to the winding staircase that greeted you as soon as one walked in. He wasn’t nervous because Jake Dillinger didn’t get nervous—at least, not around other teenagers.

Chapter Notes

Lemme just apologize real quick because i reALLY meant for there to be jealousy, not this mostly fluff piece
But hang in there
Its coming

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jake was definitely not nervous as Michael entered his empty house, eyes widening as they flitted from the crystal chandelier hanging above them to the winding staircase that greeted you as soon as one walked in. He wasn’t nervous because Jake Dillinger didn’t get nervous—at least, not around other teenagers.

“Wow,” Michael managed, after they exchanged greetings. He was still taking the house in, slightly awed by what he saw. “Nice place you got here.”

“Thanks. It’s kind of like the other one...post-fire. Were you there that night?” Jake asked as he led Michael into the kitchen.

“The next couple of days at school it was like everyone was there. Everybody had a story about the night of the party.”

He had assumed that this was a good enough question to get the ball rolling, but because he wasn’t facing Michael, he couldn’t see the grimace that appeared on his fake boyfriend’s face.

“Oh...yeah. I was in the house. Your house. I think the fire happened when I was in the bathroom.”

Jake turned around then, not expecting the severe expression Michael was portraying. “Woah, you were in the house during the fire?” He was almost surprised that his voice sounded so worried, especially when Michael was standing, fine and healthy in front of him.

Michael looked at him strangely. “I just said that.”

“Right. I got that now. You want something to drink? Or eat?”

“Oh no, I’m okay.”
The silence threatened to overtake them—and so soon too. Jake decided no matter what, to keep it moving, partly for himself but even more for Michael. He had noticed that during the car ride, Michael seemed to tense up whenever the conversation threatened to die. That, and also there was one time where Jake thought he completely blanked out. He had decided in that moment to keep on talking, and since it hadn’t steered him wrong before…

“Okay, if you’re sure. Here, let’s go up to my room.” He looked at Michael teasingly, “Just to hang out. Nothing more.”

Michael gave him a grudging smile. “Sounds good. I actually do really want to climb that incredible staircase.”

“Never got a compliment like that before, but I appreciate it.”

Together they headed up the polished marble stairs and into Jake’s bedroom. Michael was no less amazed with this room; for the first couple of seconds he just circled the room, mouthing wow to himself.

“You like it?” Jake asked.

“Are you kidding me? This room is hella dope. You have a mini fridge,” Michael said, pointing to the black sleek fridge in the corner.

“I’ve wanted one of those since I was like nine years old and first found out mini refrigerators existed.”

Jake laughed, immediately imagining a mini Michael Mell ranting about the wonders of tiny iceboxes.

“Yeah, well so did I. Not even kidding. That’s why I have one, I begged my parents nonstop. It was on my birthday and Christmas lists for like two years until they finally gave in.”

Michael smiled back, “So did I. Except my parents ended up getting me a super mini one.” He held up his index finger and thumb inches apart to illustrate his point. “The doors opened and closed which was actually pretty cool but it was the size of my hand so…I don’t know where I’m going with this.”

“That’s okay. Every time I say something there’s only a eighty-six percent success rate.”

Michael raised an eyebrow at him, clearly not believing. “Sure. Whatever you say, Jakie.”

Jake gaped. “You’re not seriously going to use that as my nickname.”

“Oh, like ‘Jakey-D’ is a whole step up.” Michael sarcastically replied. The moment after the words were out of his mouth, he was looking abashedly at the ground. “Sorry, that was—”

“Amazing. I’m going to go downstairs to get some ice for my burn.”

“I was actually going to say mean—” Jake felt a sort of victory as Michael’s smile came back—this time a full one. “—but yeah, you should really apply some cold water.”

“Fun fact: Lavender oil is great for treating burns.” He randomly interjected while noisily jumping onto his bed.

“Why do you know that?”
“Well, you know, my house burned down.” Jake stated, in a very “Duh!”-like tone.

“After that I did a bunch of research on fire related stuff and you know, now I have all this useless knowledge about burns floating around in my head instead of the answers for our chemistry test Wednesday.”

“Hey now, I wouldn’t call it completely useless. The next time someone tries to burn down your house in order to escape an insane super computer, you will be completely...covered.” It was a funny quip, but Michael’s words faltered off as Jake patted the empty bed space in front of him. He was already sitting criss cross applesauce, and looking expectantly as if he presumed Michael would join him.

In fact, that’s exactly what he presumed.

“What are you doing?” Michael asked, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“I’m waiting for you to sit down. That way we can start the process.”

“What process?” He still didn’t move.

“The process to getting to know each other, of course. Were you planning on standing the entire time?”

Michael paused, but he couldn’t really argue with that logic, so he moved over to the bed. Though in slight defiance, he dangled his legs over the side, instead of pulling them up. Jake decided to let that one go.

“Oh, okay well. Here we go.” He spread his arms wide in a welcome gesture. “What do you want to know about the-” He winked, “Uber handsome, Jake Dillinger?”

There was half a second of silence before Michael blurted out, “Why don’t you ever stutter?”

That was not a question Jake had expected.

“Wait, what?”

Michael took a deep breath, ready to try and explain himself. “What I meant was that-like, h-

“How am I so popular?”

“No! Not that. How do you not -” He wrung his hands in frustration before taking a deep breath. “How do you not freak out when you talk to someone. Like, actually hold a conversation. I’ve dedicated my entire teenage life to avoiding awkward and embarrassing moments and that is literally every interaction I have with a stranger. How do you remain so...collected?”

Jake tried to smile, a customary suave response already ready as a response, but something told him that that wasn’t what Michael was looking for. Since he already owed him, he might as well be honest.

“Well, I wasn’t always like this. And when I say like this, I guess I mean how others see me.”

“Hella smooth?”

“Hella smooth.” He confirmed. Actually, Jake had asked himself this question before. Almost a year and a half ago, he had wondered how, or even why, he could easily navigate the pressure of
high school society while so many around him were struggling to do the same. It had been useless to ask because he already knew the answer.

“You’re sure you want to hear this? It’s kind of depressing.”

“Well now I’m just curious.” Michael’s joking tone came back somewhat, “What’s the secret behind your fabulous success?”

Jake smirked but the light atmosphere didn’t last long. “Well, if you must know, and also since I owe you one-”

“-More than one.”

“Don’t interrupt. Since I owe you an undecided amount of times, I’ll tell you. Prepare yourself.”

“When I was a little younger, like middle school age, my parents were not around. A lot. At all, really. I had a bunch of nannies and babysitters and I barely saw them; they were pretty much building up their business,” He supplied upon seeing the question arise in Michael’s eyes.

“Point is, they weren’t around enough to really be my parents. Like a year before high school, right around when we moved to New Jersey, younger me decided that the reason my parents weren’t around was because they didn’t like me.”

Since Jake had never told anyone this, he wasn’t sure what the exact reaction would be.

Michael’s eyes widened and his mouth opened slightly, accompanied with a soft but sharp intake of breath. Overall, not a bad response, but Jake wasn’t done yet.

“So I thought I could become someone everyone would like. I kind of analyzed myself and watched Ferris Bueller’s Day Off like fifty times that summer, because Ferris Bueller is like the smoothest movie character I can think of, and I kind of tried to personify that. I was never a super awkward kid-not that you are either, just so you know-so it’s not like a fake personality I’m putting forward. I’m not.” Once again, Jake was having trouble articulating his thoughts in front of Michael.

“It’s not like I’m-”


“Yeah,” Jake confessed. “Or I don’t want to be that way. Maybe that’s exactly what I am and I just can’t see it.” He smiled with no real humor, not sure what he expected Michael to say.

So much for no conversation killers…

“Three things,” Michael started off, his tone resembling a drill sergeant listing off orders. “I don’t think anyone can beat Richard Gere in every movie he’s ever starred in ever as far as smoothness is concerned.”

“You’ve never seen Ferris Bueller’s Day Off have you?
“No I have not, but have you seen Pretty Woman? Or Runaway Bride? Or Chicago?”

“...No.”

“That’s what I thought-”

“We are totally going to settle this later after I force you to watch Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, which by the way is a classic -”
“So is Pretty Woman!”

“A classic romance. Ferris Bueller has everything, not just chick-flick qualities—”

Michael gasped, faux offended-or possibly truly offended, Jake wasn’t sure. “You take that back! It’s a well-rounded movie which just so happens to be a romance and how dare you disparage Julia Roberts and Richard Gere like that. They are the perfect duo—” He stopped mid-rant as he realized Jake was staring at him with a peculiar expression.

“Anyway,” Michael cleared his throat. “That’s a discussion for another time.” His eyes softened. “The second thing I wanted to mention was that you’re not a fake. Cultivated or not your personality is still your own and—”

“And what?” Jake asked, not very convinced.

“And if anything, you telling me about that proved your complete non-fakeness. So there you go.”

Jake looked like he doubted him, “Are you sure that’s how it works?”

“Positive.”

“And what was your third thing?”

“My what?”

“The third thing on your list?”

The previously sullen undercurrent lifted along with the smile on Michael’s face. It wasn’t just a smile, but a full-blown grin that really pronounced his dimples and brightened the look in his eyes. “You stuttered!”

“What?”

“When you were talking about ‘being fake’ you completely and utterly tripped over your words.”

Jake’s hands flew dramatically to his heart. “That was a moment of genuinity and vulnerability and you have the nerve to point out a simple verbal mistake—”

“The genuinity and vulnerability is what made the stutter so great.” Michael said, interrupting Jake. “It means that even the smoothest members of the human race can falter. Gives the rest of us hope.”

“That’s awfully cruel of you.” Jake teased, but his smile matched Michael’s. One of victory and—

Wait. Why was Jake’s smile victorious?

“Why are you smiling like that?” Michael asked, eyes quickly narrowing in suspicion which only served to make Jake laugh more.

“You’re smiling because I stuttered. I’m smiling, because you didn’t.”

“Wh-what?” Said Michael, instantly stuttering again and being more than aware of it. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that for the past ten minutes you haven’t stuttered once. Except for right now but I’m not counting that. Anyway, my point, is that I don’t think you stutter half as much as you think you do.”

“That’s...very confusing. And not true, I stutter plenty.”
“That’s what you want me to think but it’s all an illusion. You stutter a perfectly normal amount, and so far only when you seem nervous.”

“I’m always nervous.”

“Are you nervous now?”

Michael didn’t answer for a moment and Jake would have been very disheartened if he had replied with a yes, but instead, “No. I guess I’m not nervous now. At this very moment. Thanks to you.”

“See? You aren’t as awkward as you think. Just talk to other strangers like you do to me. Or Jeremy, talk to people like that.”

Michael shot him a look. “That stems from twelve years of friendship. Or in your case, a unique situation. When I talk to random people it’s like, what topic do I bring up?”

“The weather?”

“The weather is boring!”

“Well there’s always ‘What happens when we die,’ or the rising disappearing bee crisis.”

“I take back what I said about you being smooth.” Michael pouted as Jake scooted off the bed and opened the mini fridge. “Whenever an awkward situation arises, you just escape by talking about the disappearing bee crisis, don’t you?”

Jake grinned, handing Michael a cold can of pepsi even though he hadn’t asked for one. “Now you know my secret, use it wisely.”

He settled on the bed once more before talking again. “So what else do you want to know?”

“I feel like no matter what I ask, the answer is going to be ‘Watch Ferris Bueller’s Day Off.’”

“Depends on the question doesn’t it?”

“Hmph, fine. What’s your most embarrassing mome-”

“Also, I’m implementing a new rule where you also have to answer the questions.”

Michael’s face shifted to one of alarm. “-Color. What is your favorite color, final question.”

“You were going to ask what’s your most embarrassing memory.”


“Purple. And also no, you definitely didn’t.”

“Mine’s blue and fine. But you’re going first.”

“Okay, okay. As far as anyone else knows, I don’t have a most embarrassing moment because-”

“You’re flawless.”
“Yes, truly. *But,* between you and I...My most embarrassing moment happened in a library. I was using the bathroom but it didn’t lock, so I had to use my foot to hold the door closed. That kind of worked except someone kind of tried to open it and I kind of screamed.”

“That’s a lot of ‘kind ofs’.”

“In my defense, I was only.”

“No! Don’t tell me. I’d rather picture seventeen year old Jake shrieking in the bathroom.”

Jake’s eyebrows furrowed. “I regret telling you this. Your turn.”

“Coincidentally, mine...also happened in a library. I was paying a late fee and she-the librarian, handed me my change like-like this.” Michael demonstrated the way by displaying a tight fist, presumably gripping change.

“My brain didn’t put together that she was handing my change.”

“So? What happened?”

He looked away, already embarrassed. Jake could tell by the way his cheeks tinged pink.

In a defeated voice, he continued. “I fistbumped her.”

For the next two minutes, the air was filled with the sound of Jake’s uninterrupted roaring laughter.

“It’s not that funny!” Michael protested as Jake pretended to wipe a tear away from his face.

“It really is.” Jake cried, only eventually calming down after a little while. “How did she respond?”

He was able to ask after regaining his composure.

Michael’s expression darkened. “She laughed at me.”

It was almost enough to send Jake into another case of hysterics but Michael’s threatening look was able to somewhat control him. “I think that tops mine.”

“This is the worst getting to know you process ever.”

Jake managed to stop cracking up, but there wasn’t much that could be done about the wide grin on his face. “On the contrary, I think this is an amazing process.”

“There is no way your parents are going to ask us if we know each other’s *most embarrassing memory.*”

“You were the one that asked the question.”

“I will burn down your house.”

“Okay, fine! Only questions whose information might be needed!”

The rule didn’t last long. They started out with middle names and songs, soon crossing over into childhood pets and failed birthday parties. Time flew by as they covered tv shows, past relationships, (well, Jake’s past relationships), worst jobs and scariest paranormal encounters.
His parents walked into the sight of the two boys eating sandwiches at the kitchen counter, their animated conversation dying down as the adults entered.

It had been one of Mr. and Mrs. Dillinger’s new rules for their son ever since the incident, no friends over. Period. At least for the time being. Yet after witnessing the sweet smile on both boy’s faces, Jake’s mom decided that maybe there could be an exception.

Michael was of course, invited over for dinner right there, and even though he would have been more than prepared for an entire quiz on the life of Jake Dillinger, much less a sit-down meal, he had to decline. “My parents will be waiting for me.” He explained respectfully. They did manage to get an official dinner date out of him though, this coming Friday.

Jake walked him to the door, surprised at how fast the day seemed to go. He was also feeling very...cheerful inside. Awkward moments had been successfully kept to a minimum.

Michael’s soft smile seemed to reflect the same thoughts. “I’ll see you tomorrow at school.” He offered, with a little wave, descending the front steps. Soon he was out of sight.

Only after, after dinner with his parents, after their seemingly endless torrent of the same question “What did you do today with Michael?” phrased differently each time, after he had brushed his teeth, put on his retainer, gotten changed and was getting into bed, did he realize he had made a mistake.

I totally should have offered him a ride home! What if something happened while he was walking back? His mother would be ashamed of him.

Two ideas popped into his head at the same time after that worrying line of thought.

1. He should probably text Michael. So he did.

*Did you get home alright?*

A quick reply set his worries at ease.

*Yup, im all safe n sound*

Another text that came after that helped things even more.

*I had fun talking with you today*

*I had fun too, though I did get the third degree from my parents afterwards, they really wanted to know all about what we did today*

*What did you tell them?*

;);)

*nO JAKE STOP*
RelAx! I told them that we just talked and ate—because that’s what we did

U better have, i want your parents thinking i’m a respectable lady

At the very least u gotta buy me dinner first

I can offer you a home cooked meal that I didn’t cook

That’s pretty weak jakie

Didn’t peg u for a cheapo

2) As far as the second idea...Well he would just have to wait until tomorrow to see if it would work out.

He continued to text Michael until his eyes ached from looking at the screen and with what little self control he had at that moment, reluctantly put the phone away. If this idea was going to work out, he’d need to wake up a little earlier than usual anyway.

Chapter End Notes

guess which two character's embarrassing story is based off of the author's true experiences?? Yup that's right.
Jake's actually happened in a church basement with my choir group
Michael's is completely unedited, 100% true. The librarian, this middle aged ish lady, just stood there laughing (understandably) after i fistbumped her (i had also made a little pshw sound when it happened) and i didnt realize how embarrassing it was till i looked back on it years later
(If you wanna cheer the author ((lmao me)) up, u can leave ur own embarrassing life moment in the comments :) ;)
AS ALWAYS, bless you for reading, i love all the kudos and comments and i adore all of you
Next chapter will definitely have rich n jealous jeremy (who was n o idea whats going on)
“You are completely right. Jake is not gay.”

Chapter Notes

heY Y’ALL, It's me, the author who uses ellipses and italicizes too much
and i got a lil
a lil angst for ya ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jake was a man of many surprises. Michael found him proving that statement with every day of their new relationship. For instance, this was only the third day, and yet here Jake was, standing on his doorstep. He looked ready for school; backpack on shoulders, hair fashionably styled, easy grin already being aimed towards Michael-Who had just been about to walk to school himself.

It didn’t take long for him to explain why he was here at Michael’s house. Jake had realized that last night he had forgotten to offer Michael a ride home. Today, ever the gentleman, he was offering to walk with Michael to school.

Of course Michael accepted, so together they headed out.

“Why didn’t you just drive here?”

“Because you-oh. Oh.”

“Good job, Jakie.”

The walk to school was uneventful for all except one moment. The two boys were talking about how their friends would react to the whole fake dating trope they were currently engaged in, when Jake suggested not telling them. At least, not for a little while.

“Think about it! Their reactions are bound to be hilarious, and the entire thing is gonna seem so ridiculous-”

It would be so ridiculous to date me? One of the voices in Michael’s head hissed in his ear; he struggled to silence it. That’s not what Jake meant.

He realized that Jake was looking expectantly at him, still waiting for an answer. He forced a smile onto his face, “Yeah! So funny, that’s a great idea.”

There was a small chance his faux enthusiasm wasn’t very convincing but Jake didn’t comment on it.

“We’ll only do it for a little bit.” He reasoned with Michael as they approached the high school. “Just enough to get them to freak out, and then we can come clear.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Michael said uncertainly. He couldn’t begin to imagine how everyone would react.

Laugh at the idea, maybe.
“And we won’t even need to kiss that much. Like only three times at the most to convince them.” Jake’s tone was serious but the look in his eyes was teasing, leaving Michael more than confused as to whether or not he was kidding.

He still had no idea whether or not Jake was serious by the time they had to separate for their different classes. His goodbye didn’t give away anything either-In fact Michael could have argued that the kisses Jake exaggeratedly blew in his direction was a little too much.

They distracted his thoughts in the rest of his classes, seeming to flutter around him as if they were tangible. As if he could reach out and grab one.

Michael was scolded twice for not paying attention, one teacher even going so far as to threaten detention. He mentally cursed Jake as he headed to the cafeteria, but that quickly evolved into realizing he hadn’t seen him for practically the entire day and where exactly was he? At the very least, he was bound to show up at lunch. The Jeremy’s Friends Group sat together nearly every day.

Oh, wait.

For the shortest moment he had forgotten about Jeremy-Of course that hadn’t lasted very long.

Who cares what anyone else thought about it, what would Jeremy think about it when they told him? Michael had never kept secrets from Jeremy before, and vice versa, or so he hoped. Even if it was for a prank, would he be able to keep this from his best friend? His best friend, who had already asked about him dating Jake Dillinger. Though, technically speaking, Michael hadn’t lied.

In a not very successful attempt, Michael tried to push all those thoughts to the side as he grabbed a turkey sandwich for lunch. He could already taste the dry bread and his appetite plummeted. Nevertheless, there was still an hour of eating, talking and pretending in front of him. He waved to Chloe and Brooke who were standing in the lunch line, animatedly talking, and made his way over to the table Jeremy Heere and Richard Goranski were currently sitting at.

As he approached, he opened his mouth to greet them, but the sight he was faced with was a rather abnormal one, and it made the words freeze in his throat. Jeremy and Rich were sitting on either side of the table, heads inclined toward each other with somber looks on both their faces. They were engaged in quiet conversation, but the manner seemed urgent. What could they possibly be talking about that warranted such a severe expression?

Michael was about to found out. Taking his normal spot next to Jeremy’s side, their murmured exchange instantly ceased.

“Hey guys,” He addressed them, not able to control how strangely curious his tone sounded.

“What were you talking about? It seemed pretty major...” His words faltered as Jeremy and Rich seemed to have a quick mental talk. He watched impassively as Rich raised an eyebrow and Jeremy quickly nodded his head. It was even weirder than what they were doing five seconds ago.

Whatever it was, in that moment it seemed to be decided that Michael could be trusted with it. So instead of a greeting back, Rich opened his mouth to say,

“We’re friends right, Michael?”

What kind of question was that? Maybe Michael should have felt offended that he even needed to be asked that, but it was hard to feel so when the very inquiry raised doubts in his head. Of course, he
was friendly with Richard Goranski. Then again, he was also friendly with Jake...and Christine. And Brooke and Chloe. But was he really friends with Rich himself?

Ever since the Squip incident, they all acted as if they were friends with each other...That’s probably what led to them actually becoming friends. Really what had happened was that Jeremy was suddenly cool with them and because of that so was Michael.

But wasn’t this short boy with brown eyes the same color as his ruffled hair, who constantly wore tank tops, always talked excitedly with an apparent lisp and openly proclaimed to the entire school that he was bisexual as soon as he came back from the hospital, wasn’t he the same boy who harassed Michael and Jeremy half their high school experience? Whose past hobbies included slamming Jeremy and kids like Jeremy against the school walls? Stealing their lunch money? Pushing their papers to the floor?

That wasn’t Rich. That was the Squip.

Michael was surprised at how much the voice in his head sounded like Jeremy until he realized it was Jeremy. Those had been his exact words when Michael came to him with his concerns only a couple days after it had all went down. Concerns Jeremy had immediately brushed aside, but concerns nonetheless.

It’s not like Michael resented Rich or any of the others, nothing like that. He just seemed to be the only one noticing when Jeremy unconsciously flinched when Rich moved towards him too suddenly. The only one that realized other kids still looked at him with wariness, suspicion and even fear as he passed them by.

Anyway...It’s not like he could convey that all now and even if he could, Michael still wouldn’t. Jeremy was friends with him, Jeremy trusted him, so that meant Michael did too.

“Yeah, of course we’re friends.”

That was all the answer Rich needed. As passionately as he did everything else, the energetic student jumped back into what Jeremy and him had been discussing, and lord, did it shock Michael.

“Okay, good. So, Jeremy and I were talking about something kind of important, which you picked up on. We were talking about how theoretically, and by theoretically I mean not theoretically at all, if you have feelings for someone—Especially someone important to you, someone you care about, there’s no way in hell you should be hiding those feelings.”

The words ran out of him like flowing water, fluid and constant. In the back of his mind, Michael noted that despite the fast pace he was chattering away at, Rich didn’t stutter either.

The lisp and the speed didn’t stop Michael from understanding what he was saying either, which in turn made his blood run cold.

Were they—Could they be talking about him?

“How high school is a once in a lifetime experience. I mean there’s four years of it but you get what I mean. These years are important, and you gotta be brave through it all, you know?”

Were they calling him out about his feelings for Jeremy? How did they find out? Was Jeremy
disgusted with him, currently loathing Michael for ruining their friendship-

Overcome with his own thoughts, Michael frantically turned to look at the boy sitting next to him who was...barely paying attention. Instead, he was searching the crowd for someone.

Michael could tell immediately who it was by the way Jeremy’s eyes lit up when he finally found them-Well, her. Finally found her. Because of course this wasn’t about Michael. If it had to do with Jeremy and confessing feelings, it would never be about Michael.

This all had to do with Christine.

Michael felt as if a sick aching feeling were being injected into his veins. He had already planned to do nothing in regards for what he felt for his best friend, that was one of the first things he accepted upon realizing he was head over heels for Jeremy. So why did it hurt so much when everything he already knew smacked him back into reality once more? The reality where Jeremy was basically in love with Christine and Michael would forever remain the supportive third wheel friend.

As the hurt in Michael’s heart mixed with a steadily growing anger-Anger at Christine that he knew was unfair, anger at Jeremy for being so oblivious to his feelings and most of all anger at himself for falling for his best friend in the first place-Rich continued talking, failing to notice the stormy expression on Michael’s face.

“Together, Jeremy and I decided to stop hiding our feelings and instead make it known. Which brings us to the fact we recently realized. Well not recent for Jeremy, he’s always been crushing on Christine. But for me, well...I really, really like-Jake! You’re here!”

Michael snapped his head up as Jake appeared, lunch tray in hand, as he sat down next to Rich whose words had abruptly stopped.

Michael’s thoughts were scattered, he couldn’t form anything coherent. It was as if all the emotions he had been holding back for the past...who knows how long, decided that now would be an excellent moment to attack him. He needed time to calm his mind, to try to grasp some sort of rationality.

Because of the next words out of Jake’s mouth, Michael wasn’t able to get that.

“I see you’ve all met my boyfriend, Michael Mell.” Jake popped a french fry into his mouth, grinning widely. Michael could feel everyone sitting at the table freeze.

And then Jeremy started choking on his food.

“I’m fin-fine,” He managed to get out through his coughs as they all clamored around him. Rich, Jake, and Michael ended up waiting in tense silence for Jeremy to recover. Or to be more accurate, Rich and Michael waited in silence. Jake continued to munch on his french fries, not seeming to pick up on the sudden change of atmosphere.

Finally, Jeremy tried to speak again. “You-You and him?” He pointed wildly between Michael and Jake.

“Him and you? No, no, no, no. That can’t be true.”

Just like before Michael bristled, and this time he couldn’t push it aside. Why does everyone think I’m not good enough? He wanted to scream.
Jake and Michael’s relationship wasn’t true but in that moment Michael wished it was, if only for the fact that it would prove Jeremy wrong. Then he realized he still could prove Jeremy wrong.

Michael wasn’t thinking straight. He was overloaded with too many thoughts, had read too much into Jeremy’s meaningless statement...Those were the excuses he later formed for what happened next.

Before anyone could respond to that, could even think about responding to that, Michael was standing up from the bench. Possessed with sure and steady movements, he grabbed Jake by the collar of his shirt, pulled him up and forward so that his upper body was leaning over the table, and with nothing more than the thought of, *I hope he finished chewing his french fries,* Michael kissed him.

Michael couldn’t say that he intended the kiss to be swift and chaste because it happened so quickly, there was no time to intend anything. That being said, he had not intended it to last as long as it did, to tilt his head slightly to the right and lean into it as it happened, to let out a small intake of breath as Jake parted Michael’s lips with his tongue, or even to press back against Jake’s pushing. No, he had not intended any of that. But it was undoubtedly worth it. Jeremy’s expression was priceless; eyes wide, mouth agape.

Also, well it’s not like Michael would ever admit this to anyone, but Jake sure knew what he was doing. Because of those combining factors—And maybe also the bright smile Jake was sending his way as soon as they parted, Michael couldn’t regret it.

“It’s true.” Jake replied, looking towards the shell-shocked Jeremy.

Michael sat back down, more than satisfied and reveling in the stares he was currently getting. No one else in the lunchroom had noticed, but no one else had to. The one that mattered saw it clear as day.

And of course, Rich had also been present. Michael glanced, looked away and then eyed him once more. It had only been a second, but he swore he saw pain flash across Rich’s face, a shattered look appear in his eyes.

But the next moment it was gone and surely he had only imagined it? There was no time to think about it, Michael was getting no time to think about anything today, as Christine hurriedly made her way over.

Her voice was loud compared to the silence that none of them were breaking, though still as sweet as sugar. She smiled at everyone on the table, greeting them each, but she seemed occupied with other thoughts.

After saying hi, she leaned over to Jeremy. “Hey, do you think I can talk to you privately for a second?”

Jeremy broke his one-sided staring contest with Michael to look at her but for the first time ever, he seemed distracted by Michael.

“No—I mean yes! Of course you can talk to me, just maybe later?”

Now it was Michael’s turn to stare. Had Jeremy really turned down a chance to talk with Christine because of the kiss?

Christine smiled in response, her attitude always one of absolution. “Of course, not a problem. Next time I get you alone we can talk.”
When Jeremy didn’t even blush at that phrase, Michael knew he had for once made an actual impact. They waved goodbye as she walked off to go talk to another student. No sooner had she left the table then was Jeremy back to gaping at Michael, who was trying to contain his smile.

It felt good to be chosen.

*Was this all it took to get Jeremy’s attention?*


“How long has this been going on?”

“Ever since art night.” Jake said with a smirk. He winked at Michael in such a way that neither of the boys sitting next to them could see.

“That’s…” Now Jeremy was choking on his words. He was trying desperately to communicate something with Michael but what it was he couldn’t tell.

“Great.” Rich finished for him. “That’s great, we’re super shocked, but still happy for you two.”

“Yeah...Happy. Michael, can I talk to you real quick?”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“I mean alone. Can I talk to you alone?” His words echoed Christine’s, Michael noticed.

He dropped the unwrapped sandwich he had been holding; Michael still wasn’t very hungry anyway, and stood up with Jeremy.

“Hurry back, babe.” Jake ribbed, unable to hold back his chuckle at the face Jeremy made after that. The voice inside Michael’s head was currently screaming. Jake couldn’t have helped him better than if he had known.

Jeremy led him into the empty hallways, wasting no time to jump into his interrogation.

“What? When, how, why-”

“I don’t really know how to answer most of these.” He interrupted. "Jake already said it happened the night of the art gallery.”

“Then why am I only finding out about it now?”

This was the moment where Michael had to decide. He would either come clean or keep it going for however long Jake wanted to.

After witnessing Jeremy’s reaction...Was it even a choice?

“It’s only been two days.” Michael said casually, even though he was feeling anything but. “I was going to tell you next time I saw you, that just so happened to be today.”
Jeremy ran a hand through his soft brunette hair, a telltale sign he was nervous. After so many years of friendship, one picks up on signs of anxiousness and Michael knew all of them by now.

Sweaty hands, awkward laughs, an inability to form words and of course, the calming motion of running his hand through his hair.

Michael didn’t wait for a response. “Anyway, did you ever find out what Christine wanted?”

“Christine? Oh, no, I think she was going to tell me at lunch but I was kind of…”

“Surprised?”

“Sure, that’s one word. I just never really imagined you and Jake…”

“Well you don’t have to imagine it at all now. We should probably get back to the table, don’t you think? You can still go way into detail about what happened with Christine.”

With a reluctant look on his face, Jeremy took the first step back towards the cafeteria. “Yeah, sure.”

But instead they walked the way back together in silence.

Michael only felt the barest hint of regret for slightly...well, maybe more than slightly, overdoing the prank reveal when they approached the lunch table and were greeted by the sight of wide stares from Brooke and Chloe. Obviously, they had been informed about the news, and judging from the look on their faces, neither were going to drop it anytime soon.

Michael let out a heavy exhale, stuffing his backpack into his locker and slamming it closed.

The two girls had been relentless in their questions and observations all throughout the remaining school day. Michael ended up sleeping through history class, but he reasoned it was okay since his friends had put him through their very own Spanish Inquisition and that’s what they were learning about anyway…

Jake was supposed to be meeting him at his locker but ten minutes has passed and no one showed. If Michael didn’t leave now, he’d be late for the after school club they had both wanted to attend. At least, Michael thought Jake had wanted to attend. Maybe he was too busy revealing to everyone that their relationship was completely fake so that the next day at school, Michael could be promptly humiliated.

Yeah...He really needed some sleep.

His eyelids were drooping dangerously as Michael trudged through the empty halls. The meeting was for the GSA and he was determined to attend, especially considering the fact that he had missed the last two. He really just wanted to go home and take a nap, or maybe light up a joint; determinedly he continued on.

As four different students approached him however, seeming to have appeared from nowhere, all with suspicious looks in their eyes, a single thought ran through his head. Maybe he’d be missing this meeting too.

Michael hadn’t been cornered since sixth grade. He had been a lot shorter then, a lot easier to pick on
and a lot less high. That had changed in high school, where on a normal day he could be left alone. But Michael never forgot what the malicious expression of an ill-intentioned kid looked like, and he still witnessed it in high school—even if it didn’t necessarily happen to him. Not to mention...this did not seem to be a normal day.

There were three boys, all toned and tan, two of them wearing snap-back hats, which even in the situation he was finding himself in, Michael couldn’t help but cringe at. The other student was a girl; she had thin blonde hair and immediately seemed to be sizing up Michael. The unimpressed look on her face revealed she didn’t see much.

*Maybe they’re just having their own meeting...in the empty halls of the school.*

Michael knew his theory was ridiculous and it was quickly disproved when he tried to move past them. One of the boys, a tall kid with a sharp angular face outstretched an arm, blocking Michael’s path to freedom.

“Told you we would find him here.” Angular face said, not directly addressing Michael, but rather looking towards the other students.

“You want a fucking trophy?”

“He’s right, Dustin. It wasn’t that hard.” The girl remarked.

Michael cautiously stared, very confused.

“Just focus on what we came here to do.” The shortest one out of all of them, one of the snapback wearing offenders, commanded. He stepped forward, pointing a finger directly into Michael’s chest.

“And we’re here, to clear up the rumors that have been floating around school all day.”

Michael resisted to raise his hands in an, *I’m completely innocent*, gesture.

“Whatever rumors you’re talking about, I’m pretty sure they have nothing to do with me.

“That’s really something considering they concern you.” Dustin smirked. “Well, you and our buddy Jake.”

Automatically Michael’s eyes widened, sending exactly the wrong message to the group.

“Sound familiar now?”

Apparently, the blonde girl couldn’t stand it anymore because she stepped forward to confidently declare, “Jake Dillinger is not gay. And even if he were, there’s no way he’d be dating you.”

Silence enveloped them until the short kid said, “Well? What the fuck do you have to say for yourself?”

Michael adjusted his glasses so they fit more comfortably on his nose. Chances were reasoning wouldn’t work with these people—it never did. There was also the fact that here was yet another person who didn’t think Michael was good enough for Jake Dillinger.

It didn’t even make him angry, in that moment he was simply annoyed. So he decided to let them
know exactly what he had to say for himself.

“You are completely right. Jake is not gay.”

The girl smiled in victory. “See? Told you.”

“He’s pan.”

“Excuse me?”

“He’s pansexual, and also happens to be dating me. You seem to think it’s my fault that he choose a nobody stoner over the basket of leeches that all of you are composed of.” Michael shrugged his shoulders and gave them a What can you do? Face.

“Maybe you should bring it up with your buddy. He might have a better answer for you.

Michael wished they could have been so shocked that he’d be able to blow right by them.

Nope, definitely not. Despite his height, the short one packed quite a punch and with little more than a forceful push, sent Michael sprawling backwards against the cold tile.

They surrounded him instantly, trying to sneer cockily but obviously very angry about Michael’s comments.

“Coast clear?” Dustin asked.

The unnamed boy looked around quickly and then nodded once. “We’re good.”

Completely worth it, Michael blurrily thought as pain shot through his stomach from the immediate kick that followed those words.

The two not keeping guard hauled him up, for the brief moment supporting Michael’s body as if they were helping him out. Then Dustin smiled. “How convenient that my locker is so close.”

“I don’t think I’ll fit in your locker.” Michael pointed out through his massive headache.

“Don’t worry about it, we’ll make it work.”

And he had no doubt that they would try, but then,

“Guys wait, I think I hear-Someone’s coming, someone’s coming.”

And indeed, even in his hazy state, Michael could hear footsteps running down the halls. There was no time for the students to do anything; dropping Michael on the floor would have seemed even more suspicious. Instead they froze in place, only breathing a sigh of relief when they realized who it is.

“Jake, exactly the person we were looking for, actually.”

Michael watched, curious to see how Jake would respond but also helpless to do anything else.

“What the fuck is going on?”

They weren’t expecting his harsh tone of voice. “We were trying to teach this little singing canary what the consequence is for lying.”
It exhausted Michael to keep his head up, but he did so anyway, in order him to see what Jake would do.

The five students in the hall eyed him carefully as Jake shrugged off his backpack so that it fell to the ground. Then he approached the two boys, and motioned for them to hand over Michael Mell, who was silently wondering if this is what a hostage exchange felt like.

Maybe the boys thought that Jake himself was going to do the honors of stuffing Michael in the locker. That would explain why they looked so confused when Jake took Michael, made sure he was able to stand by himself, and then walked over to the shortest one and promptly punched him in the face.

Everyone had been standing fairly still, in a statuesque way, but as soon as the assumed leader got knocked over they all exploded into action. Well, almost all of them. Michael and the blonde girl wisely stayed to the side, anxiously watching as the four boys fought it out.

Four against one should have been an unfair fight, but Michael understand then why Jake was the star player of both the football and basketball team.

As both boys rushed towards Jake, he also charged, completely tackling the nearest one. In a second he was up again, exchanging hits with Dustin as well as two teenagers without any real fighting experience could. The punches were sloppy but intense, and it continued until Dustin exhaustedly took a couple steps back, seeking refuge by the girl.

Jake turned, smiling victoriously with a split lip and several barely visible bruises that were sure to later bloom into colorful injuries. Michael was immediately preoccupied with the present wounds, but that turned into focusing a little too much on Jake’s lips. It brought back a vivid flashback of what he did earlier today and maybe it was best to not dwell on that...

“Oh my god, Jake, your mouth! They really-I didn’t-I wasn’t expecting you to-”

“Michael, please,” Jake walked up to him, stretching an arm underneath his shoulder so that they were supporting each other. “It’s totally not a big deal.”

“It is a big deal-”

“If you’re referring to those assholes trying to attack you,” Jake’s smile faded, a frowning crease in his forehead appeared. “Then yes, that is a big deal. Did they really corner you because they thought you being my boyfriend was a lie?”

“That was the general gist, yeah.”

“I should turn around and-”

“Taking out three guys was impressive enough. You’re fine, I’m fine.”

Jake stopped and looked over to Michael, beaming. “You thought I was impressive?”

Michael rolled his eyes and tried to hide the mirroring grin. “I mean...It was only three, so maybe not that-”

“No, I’m taking that as a win. I am an impressive boyfriend.”
“So humble too.”

“You could just be grouchy from four people attacking you—”

“Very plausible—”

“Or you could just be trying to hide how infatuated you are by my charms.”

Michael felt heat flush up to his cheeks, but he was convinced that it was only the lingering energy from the fight. That and nothing else.

Together they decided against heading to the meeting and instead left the school. They wandered aimlessly at first, distracted by their talking, until they ended up at Jake’s house and agreed to spend the rest of the day playing video games.

“I don’t have any old retro games, but like...I have overwatch.”

“It’ll do.”

To make up for everything that had happened today, Jake promised to go to the next meeting with him and...

“None of it is your fault, you shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“I’m not, I just think that I was once friends with those jerks so it’s kind of on me—”

“That’s called blaming yourself. You don’t need to make up for it.”

“I’ll buy you a slurpee.”

“...You can make it up for me.”

Chapter End Notes

BLESS Y’ALL FOR READING
Couple o’ things, but the most important is
-y’ALL REALLY TOLD ME ALL YOUR EMBARRASSING STORIES AND REALLY CHEERED ME UP THEY WERE ALL BEAUTIFUL AND REALLY FUNNY I LAUGHED SO HARD You guys are a m a z i n g
-michael still has reservations about rich they may not be right bUT YOU CAN FIGHT ME ON THIS
-all kudos and comments are like,,,,,,,,my life fuel and extremely appreciated
k tUNE IN NEXT WEEK
But something else too. Something warm.

Chapter Notes

'tIS ME, THE INFREQUENT UPDATER

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The entire week felt as if it was leading up to Friday, the moment of truth, the big day.

On Monday, Jake didn’t have to think about it much. That was due to the hilarious reactions they were getting from everyone at school they had told about their “relationship”.

By the third day, Wednesday, things had cooled down. Some suspicious whispers still followed them down the hall, but Michael said he wasn’t bothered it. On the contrary, he had gotten used to it during his middle school years with Jeremy.

Jake was also used to the wide looks and loud whispers. Though to be fair, most of the time-Okay, all of the time, they were a lot more favorable, positive and envious than the ones they were currently getting. Not that he really cared. In truth, it was more disturbing to think about how Michael was accustomed to the negative ones. Where had Jake been while this was happening, the first years of high school?

Well, he had been acquiring his popularity to the level it was now, of course. Nevertheless, it was troubling, to say the least.

Anyways, their friends had seemed to accept it by Wednesday. Well, they had always accepted it, it was just that they had accepted it with disbelieving looks in their eyes and discrediting smiles. When the third day came around, after experiencing small moments of PDA between Michael and Jake (that Jake initiated for the benefit of his friends as much as it was to see the blush bloom across Michael’s cheeks), they no longer acted like it was the strangest thing they had ever seen.

In fact, it appeared to take the girls, Brooke, Chloe and Christine, much shorter to accept it than the boys, Rich and Jeremy. It sometimes seemed like they were trying to peer through Michael or Jake, past the illusion they thought they might be displaying.

He’s not used to seeing his best friend in a relationship, Jake assumed when he found himself wondering why Jeremy was almost always staring at Michael in school with the strangest expression, as if he were trying to get his attention. That didn’t make much sense though, because every time Michael turned towards him, like he had sensed his gaze, Jeremy whipped his head around in the other direction.

Maybe that was just what their friendship was like; Jake certainly wasn’t going to judge just because it was different then the way he acted with his best friend, Rich.

They had become best friends in sophomore year. It was like one minute Rich wasn’t there, and the next he was, insistent and forceful, but in the best way, becoming a huge imprint in Jake’s life. So much to the point where Jake couldn’t imagine walking through these halls without him. He went to Rich with almost everything that had ever bothered him-Though ever since the therapist, he found himself in the better position of not having to do that as often. He didn’t want to burden his best
friend with all his aggrieved thoughts—or anyone really, but at least that’s what the therapist was being paid for.

It was almost like Rich had a different personality with Jake then the one he presented at school—At least before the Squip. When they were alone, his character was softer—Dare Jake say, even a little dorky, in a very endearing manner. In front of other people though, it was like something completely different would come over him, which of course he found out was the Squip. That was the one thing Jake hadn’t known about Rich. Other then that, he’d like to think their track record of honesty with each other was pretty good.

That’s why Jake truly believed it when Rich grinned at him meaningfully and said, “You guys seem really great together.” Especially compared to any of the superficial comments that Jake received from his so called “friends”, usually accompanied with a phony smile that they didn’t even try to make look genuine.

Not that he was complaining or anything. He still hadn’t forgotten what Michael said about being bullied obviously being way worse than popularity. Jake was glad for the group of friends he had now, even if they had to go through an insane, practically unbelievable experience to get where they were currently.

On Tuesday at lunch, they had all questioned the nature of the new cut on his lip, immediately turning their attention to Michael after Jake assured him he was fine and how Michael had really gotten it worse.

Michael was easily flustered when all their eyes were suddenly directed towards him but he handled it well, waving it off just as Jake had.

“Seriously, it’s not as bad as he made it out.” Michael protested, glaring at Jake from across the table who smiled sheepishly.

“I’m fine. Jake arrived before anything could really happen. Seriously, it’s not…” His words faltered off as Jeremy’s fingers hesitantly brushed over a small purple bruise that had bloomed on Michael’s chin. The movement was slow, almost reverent, and it caused a feeling in Jake’s stomach that could have matched the strange look Jeremy was always aiming towards Michael.

Unsure of what it even was, Jake pushed it down.

It made a lot of sense that Jeremy was concerned over Michael’s injuries. Recalling the way those students had been so eager to hurt Michael sent a sharp pain twisting through Jake’s own stomach. He could hardly imagine how Jeremy would feel, considering they were that much closer.

“Do you—” Jeremy’s voice was quiet. He cleared it and tried again. “Are there any other injuries?”

“Yeah—Yes.” Michael’s voice was just as low, “Some on my stomach. But those—they aren’t that bad either.”

Jeremy nodded and withdrew his hand, ignoring the rest of the group’s questioning looks.

“I’m glad Jake was there to stop it.” He said, facing him after a moment with a grateful smile.

“Yeah,” Michael confirmed, glancing slowly between Jake and Jeremy as if he wasn’t sure which one to look at. “I’m glad too.”
On Thursday, things were more or less back to normal. At the end of the school day, the entire group was heading out together to hang at the mall.

Jake was surprised when, with a conflicted look on his face, Michael politely declined.

None of the other kids saw this as out of the ordinary, and with a shock Jake realized that more times then not, when they all hung out together, Michael had almost always said no. His excuses had been along the lines of, *I’m not feeling well* or *I have a lot to do at home.*

He couldn’t believe he was only noticing this now. So when Michael looked at all of them about to head off and smiled apologetically, saying “I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” Jake wasn’t having it.

“Are you sure, Michael?” Christine asked, as kind as ever.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. I’m sure.”

Jeremy had seemed to accept it, used to Michael saying no to group affairs. He offered a wave and said, “See you tomorrow then.” The group prepared to leave.

“Woah woah woah, hold up.” They all stopped and looked at Jake, who could so easily command their attention. “Michael, why aren’t you coming?”

“I have-uh, stuff to do.”

“Stuff.” Jake repeated, disbelieving and trying to figure out the distant expression on Michael’s face.

“Yeah, stuff.”

“Stuff won’t do, you have to come.”

“And why’s that?”

“Uh, you’re my boyfriend, of course. Who am I going to kiss at the mall?” Next to him, Jake noticed Jeremy visibly tense but there was no time to question it, Michael was already responding.

“I’m sure you’ll find somebody.” He said with a dismissing but teasing tone. Jake was disappointed to think that Michael actually wanted to stay home, until he picked up on a glimmering look in the boy’s eyes. He seemed...pleased. Pleased, and even slightly bashful that Jake was trying to convince him to stay.

Now there was no choice. Michael had to come.

Jake walked up to him and lightly grabbed both of Michael’s wrists, bringing them up to his chin. He resolutely gave him his very best pleading puppy face; lips pouted, eyes cast upwards, a look that had made weaker beings practically go insane with want.

Maybe that was overstating things a little…

Michael stared at him, unimpressed, but Jake didn’t give up. Instead, he doubled his efforts, straining to make his face as irresistible as possible.

“Please? Can you really say no to a face like this?”

Michael rolled his eyes but it was hard to miss the affectionate smile that accompanied the action.
“Yes.”

“Yes you say no, or yes you’ll come?”

Michael looked over to the group of students waiting on them, Chloe and Brooks grinning at each other and exchanging comments about how cute a couple they made. He sighed heavily.

“Yes I’ll go.”

Jake whooped in victory, drawing the attention of several students near them. He promptly ignored them, instead dropping only one of Michael’s hands, while gripping the other one tighter and using it to pull him along into the group.

With that settled, they all headed off together.

While walking to the mall, conversations were loud, animated, and all over the place between the seven teenagers. Jake would comment on one discourse, only to be pulled into another discussion a second later, soon leaving that one to talk about an instagram photo Chloe was showing everyone.

It was exhausting but fun to try and keep up, and Jake would have participated for the duration of the walk, if not for the fact that Michael was lagging slightly behind.

Jeremy was right in front of him, kind of talking to Rich and Christine together but also glancing back at Michael every couple of seconds. Since they weren’t actually engaged in a conversation with each other, Jake decided it was no big deal if he talked to Michael, semi-privately, for a bit.

He navigated his way to the very end, grabbing Michael’s hand like before to get his attention. Sure enough, his head snapped up in amazement. He didn’t pull away though, Jake noticed.

“What’s up, Jake?”

Jake responded in a quiet voice, making sure nobody else could hear, not that they were paying attention anyway.

“I was wondering if you were okay.”

“Yeah of course, why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well...So like I only now noticed that you kind of skip out a lot when we hang out with the whole group and I wanted to make sure everything is cool. Is everything cool?”

Michael snorted at the way Jake phrased the question but his expression was discordant. For a second, it seemed like he was going to give Jake a fake answer, if only to reassure him. Instead he took a deep breath and glanced uncertainly at the boy next to him.

“Yes, everything’s cool. It’s just that...”

“That?” He prompted.

“It’s-It’s like Brooke has Chloe right?” The words came out in a sudden rush.

“And Jere-Jeremy has Christine, of course, and you have Rich and vice versa and I-” He paused before he could finish the sentence. “I just don’t want to be a third wheel for everybody.”

“Michael, that’s...Wow.”
“I know, I know. It’s stupid, I really shouldn’t have to burden you with this-”

“What? No, no. I’m sorry that you feel this way. I never meant to exclude you-”

“Jake, I’m not blaming you.”

“Pshw, yeah I know that. It just sucks that you’ve been thinking this and I had no idea.”

“Well we have only been dating a couple days.”

“Still...As a friend, I should have known. I’ll show you.”

“Show me what?”

In front of them Chloe impatiently beckoned them forward, the mall doors almost within reach.

“Show you that it shouldn’t be like that. We aren’t divided into pairs, you know? We’re all here for each other.”

“You don’t have to show me that, Jake. I-I’m aware of that.”

But it was too late, Jake had already made up his mind and there was no changing it. He didn’t have a specific plan, there was just the strong urge to make sure Michael had a great time.

They started in some of the clothes shops, stereotypical teen stores like Urban Outfitters and Topshop. They spent that time with Christine, thrusting clothes in each other’s arms and demanding to see the other one try it on.

Michael eyes widened at the prices at first, “Seventy dollars for a shirt? Uh, guys my go-to store is Old Navy.” But Christine quickly reassured him.

“Don’t worry. I try on clothes all the time just for the fun of it. Just act like you might actually buy something.”

Once he was able to get past that, they enjoyed themselves, critiquing the clothes and hyping each other up as they pretended to model through the dressing room.

Afterwards they went to Auntie Anne’s for a snack. It was a general rule of Jake’s that every time he went to the mall, him and anyone he was with just had to go to the delicious pretzel shop.

With a chivalrous flair, Jake brought Michael a cup of cinnamon sugar pretzel bites and led him over to an empty table. With a wide smile, Jake attempted to throw the pretzel bites into the open mouth of Michael, who attempted to catch them.

Both failed miserably.

The one time that they did manage to land one, (After several disparaging comments, “How are you even on the basketball team?”) they both cheered so loudly that everyone around them, including both their friend group and the employees behind the pretzel counter, stared in surprise at them.

Michael’s face turned beet red, but all Jake could do was laugh.
Afterwards, they stopped for photos in one of the overpriced booths strategically placed in multiple areas around the mall. Each boy got a copy of the set of pictures, lined up in order of ridiculousness it seemed. Serious, silly, really silly, and crazy. Jake didn’t fail to notice the way Michael grinned fondly as they looked over how outrageous each picture has come out.

A couple hours had passed and almost everyone seemed to be ready to call it quits, until Chloe came up with an idea that she was resolved to follow through with; a secret plan she whispered into the ear of Brooke who instantly acquired an equally mischievous look.

Together they dragged Michael and Jake, after telling the others to keep up behind them, over to, by far the nicest store in the mall, Bloomingdales.

The two boys weren’t given the option of browsing. With the authority of a drill sergeant, the girls pulled them over to a rack of suits, refusing to let them choose their own. Instead they picked one out for each of them, shoving it in their arms with comments like, “This will make your eyes pop.” And “It’ll highlight your figure.”

Knowing they didn’t have a choice in the matter, Michael and Jake marched off with fancy suits in hand to try them on. Michael made a purposeful effort not to look at the price tag as they separated at the doors of the dressing room.

Jake was out first, used to the mechanics of slipping on a suit. His friends clapped and wolf whistled as he walked out, knowing well that Jake knew well how good he looked, and encouraging him.

Brooke had been correct. The cornflower blue of the tie had made his eyes pop.

He was just about to comment on how right she had been when behind him, the other dressing door opened, and out stepped Michael.

Jake felt his breath hitch in his throat. Michael looked...amazing. He was clutching his glasses in one hand and fidgeting with the silky black tie with the other. His hair was messily ruffled as if he had struggled putting on the dress shirt. The suit itself was sleek and form fitting; His tallness, if lanky before, now appeared graceful and smooth. To top it all off, his expression, which could have been one of uncomfortableness at standing there and modeling, instead just appeared as a sexy pout.

Contrary to Jake’s entrance, Michael’s was met with complete silence other than Chloe’s low initial, “Oh my god.”

Michael stared at each one of them, baffled by their reactions.

“Be honest, how bad does it look?” Those words unlocked the freezing spell that had come over Jake’s entire body. He slowly approached Michael and was unable to control the smile on his face.

“Dude, you look really good.”

It was so easy to make Michael blush, which he did immediately after Jake’s comments.

“The last time I wore a suit was to my Confirmation.” Michael whispered confidentially, as if that somehow took away from how good he looked.

Jake opened his mouth to respond but Brooke shouted first at the top of her lungs, “HEY, YOU SHOULD KISS HIM.”

He didn’t think it was possible for his boyfriend’s-Uh, fake boyfriend’s face to grow redder, but that it did. Jake moved closer to Michael until they were standing inches away from each other.
“Is it okay that I kiss you right now?” He whispered, so that none of the others could hear.

“You know, for the prank.” It sounded as if he was reminding both himself and Michael.

“Yeah, yeah that’s fine. You don’t have to ask every time-”

Jake felt like he couldn’t wait any longer. He leaned forward and in a second their lips were being smashed against each other for the second time in four days. Jake tried to ignore the part of his brain that whispered, *That’s not quite as often as it should be.*

Instead, he focused on how warm Michael’s lips were, and how the boy tasted sweet; remnants of their sugar covered snack.

After a couple of seconds, they broke away. Michael looked at the ground after, his face flushed, until Chloe beckoned him over as Christine said, “Come over here. Let’s get a good look at you.”

Jake watched as Michael walked off to pose in front of their friends. The girls were fawning over how nice he cleaned up, but something seemed off about the other two members.

Rich was staring off to the side, glancing first at Michael, then Jake, just as quickly looking away before their gazes could met. His expression looked pained, and Jake wondered if he was feeling sick from the pretzels.

He couldn’t come up with a suitable explanation for Jeremy though. The boy’s face was carved from stone. It reminded Jake of the marble statues at one of the art galleries his parents had dragged him to once. Angry, and fierce looking too, as if something was upsetting him. Jeremy tore his eyes away from where he had been staring, at Michael striking ridiculous stances for the sake of the girls, and caught Jake’s eyes. The expression didn’t waver.

Of course it made Jake curious, and he decided he would ask Jeremy about it, but amidst Jake and Michael hurriedly changing back into their own clothes, Brooke’s comments about how they would be the cutest couple at prom, and a rush to get out of the mall because Michael’s mom texted wondering where her son was and why exactly wasn’t he home at the approved time, Jake ended up forgetting about it.

Brooke, Chloe and Christine headed off in the opposite direction, exchanging goodbyes as the four boys speed walked over to Michael’s house.

After he quickly replied to his mom and explained how he was on his way home, Michael turned to Jake who had a question floating around in his mind.

“You face looks very strange right now.” Michael commented, breaking the silence when Jake didn’t say anything.

“Gee thanks, babe.”

“I’m being serious! You look like you’re wondering about something.”

Jake stared at Michael, startled that he picked up on his thoughts so easily.

“Yeah, actually. I was wondering something.”
“Well...What was it?”

“Earlier today when we were walking to the mall, and we had that conversation-”

“Oh geez, it seems so silly now.”

“No, don’t worry, you’re fine. It wasn’t silly. I was just curious about one thing, something you said.”

Michael stole a look behind him at Jeremy and Rich, who were walking next to each other in companionable silence, and then turned back to Jake.

“What’s your question?”

“You said that Brooke has Chloe and I have Rich and that Jeremy has Christine but...Isn’t he your best friend? I mean they’re all friends-Do you get what I’m saying?”

Michael stared at Jake like he was crazy. “You haven’t notice that Jeremy is like, hella crushing on Christine? That’s what I meant when I said that.” His tone almost came across as sad.

Jake thought about it for a moment.

“You know, I can kind of see it.”

Michael’s face broke into a smile and he let out a disbelieving kind of chuckle. “You’re like the only one who wasn’t aware.”

Jake shrugged innocently. “I think it’s because ever since she told me she doesn’t want to date anyone-”

“Christine doesn’t want to date anyone?”

His tone was one of such surprise that Jake felt he had just revealed a deep secret.

“I thought-Did you not know? She said that she was beginning to tell everyone so I thought that you guys knew already.”

It had happened a little while after the play, during a moment where Jake and Christine found themselves alone together. Things had been friendly between the two ever since the break-up, and they were making some idle small talk when all of a sudden Christine blurted out,

“Jake, I’m asexual.”

He was surprised obviously, and for a second didn’t know what to say. He even contemplated telling her his own secret in solidarity but decided it wasn’t the right moment.

“That’s...great, Christine.” He had said, truly meaning it. “Wait, did you know when we were-You know, dating?”

She had smiled sheepishly. “I had some inkling, it was kind of like a test trial-Oh, not like that, I mean you were a good boyfriend until like the very end.”

Jake flushed in embarrassment, remembering his own actions at the Halloween party.
“After we broke up, that’s kind of when I knew for sure.”

“But Asexual doesn’t mean you don’t not want to date right? Or like, you can still date people.” He wondered if there was anyway he could have phrased that more confusingly. Christine smiled it off though, seeming to understand what he was asking.

“I can still date people, romantically, yeah. But honestly, I don’t really want to right now. After everything that happened, I’m enjoying the simplicity of friendships.”

It was a nice statement, and Jake appreciated her confiding in him, which he made sure to tell her.

“Yes, I’m planning on telling everyone.” She grinned, “Soon it’ll all be out in the open.”

And so Jake had assumed that everyone knew. Looking at Michael’s reaction, he realized that may not yet be the case.

“No, no, I didn’t know...And I don’t think Jeremy knows either. I have to tell him.” Michael muttered.

“You, yeah...No. Maybe not?” Jake offered.

Michael looked sharply at him.

“I’m just saying, Christine is definitely going to tell him soon. I didn’t mean to spill that, it’s really her thing to tell.”

Jake looked at him pleadingly, certain that Michael would be torn by loyalty to his best friend. “Just a little while, I swear.”

They both paused as they reached the gate to Michael’s house.

He let out a sigh. “Yeah, okay, I’ll wait. It’s her thing to tell.”

Jake smiled in relief. “Thanks, Michael.”

“Yeah, no problem.” They stopped talking as Jeremy and Rich reached them.

“See you guys tomorrow.” Jake waved happily as the two boys walked into Michael’s house; Jeremy going to hang out with him for the rest of the afternoon.

Only Michael waved back.

Rich and Jake walked to Jake’s house in relative silence, the only talking being a short exchange.

“Are you feeling better?” Jake had asked.

Rich looked at him strangely. “I’ve been feeling fine the entire afternoon.”

“Oh. Okay then.”
When they reached Jake’s house, Rich was invited inside, but he just slowly shook his head.

“Your parents still don’t like me, right?”

“Uh, it’s not that they don’t like you.” He choose his words carefully. “They’re just a little...wary.”

Rich smiled softly, “Understandable. Next time you can hang out at my house, how about that? Until then, I’ll see you at school.”

They said goodbye and Jake watched until the retreating boy’s figure disappeared down the street.

Those four days had all been leading up to the fifth, Friday, the night of the dinner with his parents.

Jake expected to be nervous, waiting for the familiar feeling of a fluttery stomach that came before a big game and that was sure to come now. Yet, when Michael came to the door, casually dressed up in a plaid button down, Jake smiled easily and the feeling never appeared.

True to her word, his mom had cooked Italian, a big pan of lasagna that smelled heavenly and the special treat of cannolis for dessert.

*We should definitely have Michael over for dinner more often.* Jake thought as, after quickly devouring the first piece, he eagerly cut himself another slice.

His parents questioned Michael on school, sports, his plans for the future, his family-Everything they could think of, it seemed.

Michael took it all in stride. There were still some times when he stuttered, obviously that wasn’t going to completely disappear, but he seemed comfortable; more at ease.

By the end of the night, Jake could tell Michael had successfully won over his parents, this time by his sincerity.

Michael excused himself to the bathroom once dinner was done, and Jake and his dad began collecting dishes off the table as his mom began to put things away in the kitchen. Jake kept on seeing his dad look at him from across the table, then glance back down. Look up, look down. He wasn’t sure what the looks meant but Jake figured if his dad had something to say, it would eventually come out; He didn’t expect it to happen so soon.

His father placed a tentative hand on Jake’s shoulder, the other carefully balancing a small stack of dishes. He looked directly into his son’s eyes and smiled.

“I have to apologize for ever doubting you. You really proved me wrong and, you know, I’m happy that you’re happy.”

Jake could barely choke out a thank you as his dad walked into the kitchen. Michael came out from the bathroom and his face immediately fell when he saw Jake’s.

“Is everything okay? Did-Did they not-”
He stopped when Jake smiled widely, “Everything’s okay.”

Upon hearing his parent’s approaching footsteps, Jake whispered conspiratorially, “I’ll tell you later.”

That later time happened to be after dessert, after Michael said goodbye to Jake’s parents and after Jake had driven Michael home. They were standing on the doorstep of his house when Jake relayed what his dad said.

Honestly, there was a part of him that didn't want to. Because Jake knew what it meant. It meant that they would go to school tomorrow, shock their friends even more than the first time by telling them it had all been fake, and then it’d be over. Officially done. For a reason that Jake was having trouble putting into words, he didn't want that.

Nevertheless, there was no other option. Michael deserved to know so that he could get on with his life.

So quietly-something to do with the stillness of the night made Jake feel like he should be whispering-He related to Michael everything his dad had said.

“It was a complete success.” He finished, knowing that meant he should be happy and full of celebration.

Michael smiled, “I’m really glad, Jake. That’s amazing.” And Jake waited for it, for Michael to tell him that they could stop pretending and everything could go back to normal now. That’s not what happened.

Instead, Michael leaned forward on the tip of his toes, despite the fact he was almost as tall as Jake anyway, and kissed him. Quick, chaste, sweet. Jake was too stunned to do anything as Michael said goodbye and walked into his house with a gentle smile.

Driving home, Jake was feeling many things. Confusion for starters, but something else too. Something warm. He brushed his fingers over his lips where Michael had kissed him, and grinned.

Chapter End Notes

SHOUTOUT TO @ANONYMOUSFAN FOR COMING UP WITH THE SHIP NAME JACHAEL, I lowkey hated all the other ones I came up with (make??? jichael??? eW)
Michael/Jake Kiss: 3
Michael/Jeremy Kiss: 0

I CAN KIND OF SEE AN END TO THIS, not extremely soon, but i think i’ve crafted something out
be prepared for angst, this amount of fluff from me is unusual

AS ALWAYS, your comments give me life, they fuel my veRY EXISTENCE, and i
adore every one
Was their fake relationship supposed to end after the dinner? Michael had no idea. He wasn’t sure how long it was going to go on or when they would tell their friends, but as more time passed, the answer became less and less clear.

On Monday, Michael and Jake had coincidentally met up in the bathroom during each of their respective classes. It was as normal as any of their other encounters until the very end, when they were both walking out into the empty hallway and had to go their separate ways.

Jake had pecked him softly on the lips and then was sauntering away, pausing to look back only when Michael frantically called out, “J-Jake!”

“Yeah?”

“You-There’s nobody here, though.” Michael pointed out.

The boy only smiled in response, “I know.”

Jake didn’t bring it up and so neither did Michael. The days turned into one week, two weeks, and no one mentioned it.

Which was fine with him; It was almost as if they forgot about it. Holding each other’s hand whenever they walked together was almost like a routine, something it felt like they had always followed and would continue to follow.

The times when he wasn’t with Jake was when Michael actually remembered. They weren’t truly
dating, this was all a ruse; a secret they were keeping from all their friends...Not to mention Jake’s parents. Even if it didn’t feel like that, that’s what it really was.

Though some things did change, they were mostly in subtle ways that even Michael himself barely picked up on. For instance, the whispers that always seemed to be following him were a little more positive nowadays. A little less scorn, a lot more envy regarding the fact that he was Jake Dillinger’s chosen boyfriend.

Michael would be lying if he said that that change was at all unwelcome.

His relationship with his parents hadn’t altered at all, however. Michael assumed they didn’t know and would continue to not know about him and Jake, probably forever.

Of course, there were some differences that were a little more obvious.

For starters, now he had someone who always made it a point to drive him to school every morning. Someone to kiss when they greeted each other, and of course someone who provided a reason for going to the school’s extremely hyped up football games.

Now that he was actually hanging out with the entire group, he could feel himself growing closer to everyone. Michael realized that his fear, while maybe not irrational, was regardless proven false. That felt good.

Other things however, were not as good.

In the twelve years that composed their friendship, things had been tense between Jeremy and Michael exactly four times. He wasn’t talking about ridiculous fights that ended in a day or two of radio silence before they begrudgingly forgave each other-No, those instances occurred a hell of a lot more.

Michael was referring to the times when they could have been locked in a room together for hours and neither would have a word to say. Times where the only interactions they exchanged were furtive looks whose meaning couldn’t be interpreted.

The first three instances could barely be remembered. That’s how strong their friendship was. At the time, the problems had seemed massive, Michael and Jeremy hadn’t known if they would ever get over it. But get over it they did, and here they stood today.

The fourth time was in the bathroom of Jake Dillinger’s massive Halloween party, where over both the pounding music and the loud shouts of teenagers, Jeremy had viciously insulted Michael and walked out.

As the rest of the events played out, Michael didn’t just have to deal with the rising tide of emotions, the sheer amount of panic that hit him full force in the bathroom that night. He also had to deal with it almost every night after.

But that wasn’t Jeremy. That was the Squip.

It was a repeated mantra of his, one that allowed him to have a stronger hold on reality every time he thought back to those moments of his life, which admittedly had been less and less recently. But they were still there.
That was besides the point. What Michael was trying to say is that the instances when he felt genuinely at odds with his best friend were far and few in between. It was important to consider, because Michael was beginning to suspect they were about to fall into another one.

At first he thought he was just making things up, and for once his paranoia was actually a reassuring thought. Of course there was nothing wrong between him and Jeremy! Why would there be anything wrong?

But soon it became so obvious that even a blind man could have noticed it.

Jeremy didn’t really talk to him at lunch anymore, instead having conversations with literally anyone else at the table. He stopped asking to come over; the last time had been the day of the mall trip and even then they had played video games in an uncharacteristic silence until Jeremy claimed much too early that he had to leave.

Michael couldn't catch his gaze either, whether in the hallway or sitting across from each other at the same table. Every time he turned to look, Jeremy was moving to avoid his stare.

That definitely didn’t feel good, and Michael had to consistently push down the voice that suggested it was just like the Squip all over again. Except he knew Jeremy didn't have the Squip, he was still a dorky nerd to everyone else. That meant it completely had to do with Michael.

Even Rich commented on it, sending a concerned look his way one lunch time and a tentative, “Is everything okay between you and Jeremy?”

Michael had nodded yes a little too eagerly...

It wasn’t hard to figure out why all this was happening, or at the very least, it wasn't hard to guess why. It had all started the day—or even the very moment he had kissed Jake in front of all of them.

But he couldn’t think of a specific reason for why that would cause Jeremy to act the way he was...Unless Jeremy liked Jake. That couldn’t be possible, right? Surely, if his best friend had a crush on someone other than Christine, Michael would have been immediately informed. Then again, Jeremy still didn’t know that Michael and Jake were fake dating.

Whatever the case, things between them were strained. The way Jake and Michael so casually brushed hands or spent time together at Jake’s house didn't improve matters either-And okay, fine, it was true that at first their blatant couple-ness was what Michael wanted. It had caused Jeremy to actually pay attention to him, and what more was he hoping for then that? So what did it matter that all it cost was a couple of fake kisses?

He definitely wasn’t using Jake. Their relationship was fake so there was nothing to use.

It didn’t matter anyway because the more...comfortable Michael and Jake were together, the more tension grew between Michael and Jeremy.

It grew and grew until Michael had had enough and exactly two weeks after him and Jake had started their relationship, Michael decided he would confront Jeremy about it. Sit him down and demand an answer.

Why are you acting like this?

Why are you distancing yourself?
That never happened-Or more accurately, it didn't happen in the way he expected. Instead of him dragging Jeremy to a private place and forcefully figuring out what was going on, Jeremy approached him at the end of the school day and offered to meet up.

Michael was walking out of the high school without Jake for the first time in who knows how long; The boy was being held up by one of the teachers who needed to discuss something with him. Jake had told him not to wait up, so Michael was about to begin the short trip home under the glaring heat of the shining sun when Jeremy ran up to him. He was breathless, like he had sprinted to try and catch Michael.

After so many times of avoided eye contact, Michael couldn’t find it in himself to stop staring. Jeremy didn’t seem to have that problem. He nervously fiddled with his hands and stared at the ground while asking in a voice that could barely be heard above the chattering talk of all the students around him, “Do you want to go to the restaurant today? Right now?”

He sounded so timid and Michael immediately wanted to know just what had happened between them that made Jeremy think he had to act in any way at all, shy, in front of his best friend. So he did his best to set him at ease, to show him that nothing had really changed.


Jeremy reluctantly smiled back, but in a moment it darkened again, “Do you-Do you have plans with Jake or anyone?”

Michael thanked God he hadn't made plans with anybody that day, shaking his head as a response.

“Nooo, no plans. We could spend the entire day together.” He shut his mouth as soon as he said it, not even realizing what he was suggesting, but it was okay. Jeremy’s grin came back, brighter this time, and it didn’t go away as they walked along.

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

The Italian restaurant was barely crowded, most likely because of the strange hour they were walking in at; past lunch but not yet dinner.

On the positive side, they were seated almost immediately. A small table with a clean white tablecloth and a single red rose in a thin glass vase that Michael tried not to stare at is what they were led to. The waitress placed down the two menus and then retreated to the kitchen, leaving two boys who had exactly no idea what to say to each other alone.

What was the protocol for this type of awkward situation? Did they order first and then talk about...Whatever they had to talk about. Would it be rude to pick up a menu?

Truthfully, Michael was waiting for Jeremy. He was waiting for Jeremy to pick up a menu, point to an item, and with the most ridiculous rolling of his tongue say, “This-a is a parmigiana.”

Jeremy didn't do that. Instead, he stared at Michael as if he didn't really know who he was.

There had never been a silence this thick and uncomfortable between the two boys before; Michael wasn't used to it and he certainly couldn't stand it. He opened his mouth to say something but it
seemed Jeremy couldn't bear it either,

“How are-uh, how are things with Jake?” It came out in a rush, like Jeremy wanted the words to hurry up and be out of his mouth.

“Things are good between me and Jake.”

Did Jeremy’s face seem a bit too disappointed?

“That’s good. Good for you two. You-You’re sure spending a lot of time with him.”

Michael gave him a look. “Well he is my boyfriend.”

“YeahwellI’msupposedtobeyourbestfriend.”

“What?”

“What?”

Jeremy stared innocently. Michael took a breath.

“Is everything okay-Actually no, I’m not gonna ask that. Obviously something is wrong.” Michael tried to hide how desperate he believed he sounded-and to be fair he was. He wanted so badly to know what was up with his best friend.

“So what is it?”

“Can I take your drink order?” The waitress was back, a polite smile on her face. Michael ordered a root beer, Jeremy a cherry coke. Then it was back to the stares until Jeremy saved them both by saying, “Nothing is wrong, okay-”

“Don’t bullshit me, Jeremy.” Michael leaned in close. “I know you, almost better then I know myself. Tell me what’s up.”

The boy took a breath. “It-It sounds stupid when I say it outloud. It is stupid, kind of.” Michael was reminded of when he was saying practically the same thing to Jake; just a different fear.

“You can tell me.”

Jeremy couldn’t meet his eyes. “I just don’t want to think-I’m afraid that-I mean I don’t even know if it’s fair for me to say it-”

“Spit it out, Jeremy!”

“I just don’t want you to replace me.”

Ah. So that's what it was.

“Jer-”

“Don’t-You don’t need to try and comfort me, Michael. That's not what I'm looking for.” He
covered his face with his hands and exhaled, then placed them on the table, inches away from Michael’s.

“I didn’t want to tell you because, I just... I guess-”

“Jeremy. You don’t have to tell me why.”

“I don’t?”

“No, you don’t. I’m-” Michael stared down at the table, “-Sorry, that you had to feel like that. But I don’t need an explanation.”

It was strange, but he wasn’t lying either. Michael was empathetic with what Jeremy was saying because he knew what it felt like; He wouldn't want anyone to go through that, much less Jeremy Heere.

“You have to know by now, you have to know that after everything we’ve been through and after all our years of friendship, you’re irreplaceable.” Jeremy didn’t meet Michael’s eyes.

“I could never replace you. I would never want to.”

Michael reached his palm out the couple of inches and grasped Jeremy’s hand, trying to connect with him the same way they had so many times before.

Jeremy looked up and stared with wide eyes at the boy in front of him.

“You know that, right, Jeremy?”

“Yeah...Yeah, I know that.”

There was still something in the air though. Something that Michael felt had yet to be said, and Jeremy felt it too. He knew he felt it because Michael could tell he was about to say something, something big. It was in the lines of the face, the look in his eyes.

“Michael, the-there’s something I’ve realized and I’ve been debating whether to tell you but I’m-I’m just going to say it and I think I-”

“And here you boys go.” The waitress was back, placing their respective drinks in on the table. “Are you two ready to order?”

Michael hadn't even looked at the menu but suddenly he wasn't very hungry. “I’ll just have the mozzarella sticks.” He said as she whipped out her little notepad and pen and wrote down his order.

He received a curious look from her, “Just the appetizer?”

“Yeah, that’ll be all for me. Thank you.”

In an ironic twist, Jeremy did order the chicken parmigiana, only he said it his normal voice, one that made Michael feel slightly deflated inside.
She scrawled down his order too, and then gave them both a knowing smile.

“You two make a very cute couple, if I do say so myself.”

Shit.

Michael froze for a couple of seconds, waiting for Jeremy to frantically protest and correct her immediately, the same he had always done whenever someone insinuated they were together. He stayed silent however. So instead, Michael refuted it.

“Oh! He and I aren’t-We’re not together, I have a boyfriend who is...not him.”

“Ah, I see.” The waitress replied, really only seeing the way Michael’s hand was lightly resting on Jeremy’s. Following her eyesight, Michael quickly yanked it away.

She pocketed the notepad and briskly walked away to escape the awkward atmosphere after telling them she’d be back soon with their food.

It killed Michael that they had been so close to being on solid ground with each other. So close to being stable, but at the last moment was plucked from safety and dropped once more into silence.

“How-uh, weird, that she thought we were dating.” Michael tried, hoping Jeremy would be able to laugh it off.

“Yeah.” His voice was tense and his expression stony.

“Really weird.” Michael noticed the hand he had been holding was now clenched.

“Anyway, what were you about to say? Before the waitress came?”

“Nothing.” Jeremy snapped, much too quickly. “I mean-Not nothing, but it’s not important now.”

Actually, it seemed very important but Michael knew it wasn’t the right time to press. Maybe he could bring it up again when they were once more comfortable with each other-because of course that time would come. It had to.

He just needed something that would get them back on the right track.

“So...How’s-How are things between you and Christine?”

It was the one subject guaranteed to work, and, okay sure, it wasn't Michael's favorite topic. But it was almost always worth it, just so he could see the sparkle in Jeremy’s eyes and the soft smile he always used when talking about his crush appear.

Nothing ever seemed to be going according to plan lately. This instance wasn’t an exception. If it was possible, Jeremy’s face darkened even more. Michael could feel any lasting hints of a good mood drop.
“Ah, right...Well, as it turns out, Christine is asexual. That’s the uh-the thing she wanted to talk to me about for the past couple of weeks. Which is good for her-Great for her actually.” Jeremy’s dejected expression turned into a sheepish one as he looked at Michael a little bit sadly. “I just wish there was some way I could’ve found out sooner. Save some time, I guess. Focus on uh-Other things.”

Michael was trying very hard to keep a controlled expression as his mind raced to find the perfect phrase, something that would seem like a natural thing he would say in response to this old news.

“Wow. That is really surprising. Um...How unexpected-”

Was it possible for him to have said anything worse? Jeremy’s eyes narrowed, his face fell. Michael witnessed a wall starting to build between him and the boy sitting in front of him.

“You knew?” Michael was not prepared for the amount of hurt that had found itself in Jeremy’s voice.

“You knew, and you didn’t tell me?”

“It’s not that I didn’t want to tell you but Jake said that-”

“Oh, so because Jake said so, it’s cool to hide things from your best friend, despite the fact that we’re supposed to tell each other everything. That makes perfect sense.”

It was ridiculous to think that now was anywhere near the right time, but Michael had the strongest urge to confess about his and Jake’s relationship. He couldn’t explain it, but there was just a feeling. A feeling that if he didn’t say anything about it soon, things were going to get a lot worse.

But of course he wasn’t going to say something, not until Jake knew; It was only fair to him.

Had Michael been fair to Jeremy?

“Jeremy, please-”

“No.” Jeremy’s voice was laced with anger as he knowingly copied Michael’s previous word, words that had been said at a time when both boys had hope that everything would turn out alright.

“I don’t need an explanation. In fact, I don’t want one.”

Jeremy stood up from the table, indignation in his every move.

“The food hasn’t even come yet.” Michael tried desperately.

The boy wasn’t fazed. “My appetite's gone.”

Was it those words that sparked a hot flame in the pit of Michael’s chest? Those words and something else he couldn’t identify, but Michael realized that he couldn’t let Jeremy leave the restaurant, not until he had at least tried to make him see reason.

Still, he wasn’t expecting his tone to be just as sharp when he peered up at his visibly upset friend and snapped, “This is not about Jake. It’s not about him or me or you, it’s about Christine. She
wanted to tell you herself-I wasn’t even supposed to find out, okay? So stop being such an ass because I only did it for her.”

Michael wasn’t the only shocked at himself. Jeremy stared, mouth opening slightly but unable to form a response.

The force of Michael’s statement lessened considerably when he asked for confirmation, a tired and broken, “Okay?” as his voice cracked on those two syllables.

Jeremy closed his mouth; it set into a hard line. The soft blue of his eyes which had appeared so warm earlier crystallized and turned icy. His expression betrayed nothing but dissent.

“Yeah, whatever.”

He turned and left the restaurant. Michael watched him go.

Minutes later the waitress arrived, holding a steaming plate of chicken parmigiana and a smaller dish of mozzarella sticks.

“Where did your friend go?” She asked politely. Michael didn’t have an answer.

Time passed but he wasn’t exactly sure how long. Michael managed to eat exactly one bite of his food, but couldn’t get the rest of it down. He felt ill.

At a later moment, the waitress came back one final time to drop off the bill. Her tone was just a tad worried as she gazed first at the face of the boy seated in front of her who seemed so much more dejected than before, and then to a spot on his thumb, where he was idly rubbing the stem of the table rose between two fingers that covered a sharp thorn.

“Oh, sir, it looks like your hand is bleeding! Do you need a napkin?”

Michael’s response was slow. He stared at the hand as if it could reveal something, concentrating especially on the scarlet red dot that was blossoming. He looked up at the waitress with an unidentifiable expression.

“No, it’s okay. I’m fine.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay I don't really like the flow of this chapter it seems really disjointed but y'all deserve an update, it's so late lemme tell you (okay well actually i don't know how many days its been because i dont keep track of time well) because ive had a basketball camp this past half week, and then my phone got confiscated and then the internet and power went out after a storm (it started hailing in august, true story,, ,,y'all it ain't even cold here, i think it's the apocalypse) and it only came back on today! S O, I love the name prep game and i love all of you and every single comment ever
posted on this fanfiction, and this chapter hopefully has some of the boyfriends that I promised y'all even though... it's not exactly happy
I'm listening to Bruno Mars' When I Was Your Man and IF YOU THINK ABOUT HOW FITTING IT IS KIND OF-Okay I'll stop

I'M ACTUALLY FORMULATING THE ENDING FOR THIS, it's coming close but not too close
Stay tuned
I adore all of you
your comments make me live
Bless
Jake would never take his parents for granted. That was the result of them coming back into his life after barely being present. Of course, there were still times when he felt like mouthing off, or rolling his eyes-He was after all, a teenager. But he could never get into serious arguments with them, never fiercely fight the way his friends told him they sometimes did with their parents. It was too risky. Of course he knew they loved him, he knew they cared; It was mostly too late to go back now anyway, he had already opened himself up to them. It’s just that he could never completely shake away the lingering fear that every football game they went to was going to be the last one. Every celebratory dinner had a time limit ticking down. Plus, not getting into fights was always a good thing. Jake’s reasoning was, why chance it?

On the short mental list he had recently made of stable things in his life, things he could count on, he was somewhat reluctant to put his parents on the list. Then he figured that was unfair to them, they were here now and that’s what mattered.

Other things on the list included his best friend, his undying love for mint chocolate chip ice cream, and the unwavering want for a dog. And-Well he might as well be honest with himself, Jake was also considering adding Michael.

Was it fucked up that he was more sure of that then his parents? He wasn’t going to dwell on it. It just seemed that Michael was becoming a constant support and Jake really liked him. That. Really liked that he was becoming a constant support.

Anyways...This line of thought all stemmed from a small group of incidents that happened a couple of days before Jake Dillinger’s birthday.

A few times he had heard his parents arguing in the upstairs bedroom. It didn’t happen often, but it wasn’t completely unusual either, so Jake had let it go. The next night however, his dad was preparing the couch for bed; A sheepish and unsatisfactory smile meant to placate Jake’s questions his only response when asked about it.

Jake didn’t want to get too far ahead of himself, fear something so much that it would end up swallowing him whole, but he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t just a bit concerned. Concerned about the worried looks his mom was wearing more often and concerned about the tired expression that was failing to disappear from his dad’s face.

That was why Jake didn’t feel the need to remind them about his birthday. He was never the type of person to make a big fuss over it anyway, and he felt full of himself even talking about it. So at
school and at home he kept it on the downlow, preparing himself the eve of not to be disappointed at the lack of...anything.

He woke up to the smell of bacon, a wonderful aroma to wake up. That wasn’t the only one either; It was soon followed by pancakes and coffee. Embarrassed at the grin he was already wearing, Jake hopped out of bed and rushed downstairs.

There was a wonderful spread of breakfast foods on the counter. His nose had been right on; there was bacon, pancakes and coffee but that wasn’t all. Those dishes were surrounded by a large plate of hash browns, scrambled eggs, a container of orange juice and even a platter of croissants.

The insane amount of breakfast wasn’t what he noticed first, though. It came second to the sight of his parents sitting at the kitchen island, holding each other’s hands and smiling brightly at their son.

“The traditional Dillinger birthday family breakfast.” Were his mom’s first words of greeting to him, accompanied with a dramatic flourish of her hand. It had been silly to think his parents would ever forget something like his birthday and Jake felt the calming sense of his fears being eased. He sat down with his mom and dad and demolished the breakfast.

After, as they were clearing up the dishes, Jake couldn’t help it. He asked his mom if everything was okay now. She ruffled his hair just like she had when he was a child.

“You noticed, huh?”

Jake gave her a look. It was pretty noticeable.

“It was just some things with our business, a couple of concerns.” Her voice was dismissive as if they didn’t have a care in the world.

“But it all got sorted out, and now, everything is absolutely perfect.” Jake returned her smile.

He added his parents to the list.

Even though it was the weekend and thus they had the day off, Jake’s parents figured he would want to spend the day with his friends-or boyfriend. So they released the boy from all of his duties and suddenly, Jake had the entire day free to do whatever he wanted.

So what did he want to do?

He had texted Michael mid-breakfast, hoping by the time it was over they’d have some sort of plan for today. Breakfast was over though, and he still had no response. Jake tried not to look too much into it, texting Rich instead with a simple, You wanna hang out today?

¡TS YA BIRTHDAY!!!

OF COURSE

Meet me at mah house like rn
Jake smiled down at his phone as he grabbed his keys and drove over to his best friend’s house. It had only been a couple of days since they last hung out but for some reason it seemed like a long time. Regardless, it would be rectified now.

Rich was waiting on the porch by the time Jake reached his house. They weren’t going to spend the day inside; knowing Rich, he probably already had a plan. Jake’s assumptions were confirmed when Rich practically bounced inside his car, buzzing with excitement and turned to him with two certificates. He wouldn’t sit still and Jake was trying to keep his eyes on the road like a responsible driver, so he wasn’t able to make out the words. Instead he followed the directions Rich had inputted into his phone and asked every five seconds where they were going until the boy next to him finally gave in.

“One word, my friend. Paintball.”

Surprisingly, Jake had never been paint-balling before, even though he had always l wanted to. That was only part one of Rich’s plans for today, he was informed by his enthusiastic friend, hence the coupons for two free first sessions.

Before he had to put all his stuff in the locker they provided, Jake checked his phone one last time. Nothing. He wasn’t disappointed or anything, that’d be stupid considering he hadn’t even bothered to inform Michael it was his birthday. It’s not like Michael had any way of knowing that today was a little more special than most days, so it wasn’t fair to hold him to some sort of fake boyfriend standard.

“You okay?” Rich was next to him, already finished with putting his stuff away.

“You look kind of distracted.”

Jake turned to him with a smile. How rude was he, not focusing on the person he was spending time with right now? He locked his phone, wallet and keys away and tightened the straps on the protective vest he was wearing.

“Yeah, I’m great. Let’s go shoot people with paint.”

“Holy shit, I love paintball.” Rich said, exhaustedly unhooking his vest as he slumped down on one of the wooden benches.

Jake shared his exact sentiments. How fun can running through and past various obstacles and harmlessly shooting tiny balls of paint at other people be, while pretending to be in the thick of an intense gun scene from any number of generic action movies?

Very fun, he found out. Very, very fun.

The rousing element was added to when you had someone crouching along right by you. Someone that you could say nonsensical things to like, “Delta Alpha, Three ‘O’clock.” and they would pretend to go along with it.

That being said, it was also very tiring. The guns and vest were heavy, as was the feeling of disappointment if you lost. (It was his birthday. He shouldn’t have lost.)
Having already paid at the beginning of the three sessions they played, all they had to do was turn in the equipment and collect their things. Jake purposefully avoided looking at the black screen of his phone as they headed to the car, resisting the temptation to check the notifications.

Before turning the car on, they sat in it for a while, going play-by-play over their best moves and reveling in the cozy heat the car contained from sitting in the sun until it became too unbearably hot.

“So, what’s the second part of the plan?” Jake asked, more than curious especially since part one had gone so well.

“Fun fact: I actually have no idea.”

Rich smiled as Jake burst out laughing but he was also beginning to look panicked.

“I’m not kidding! I seriously thought that an idea would come to me in the midst of kicking paintball ass but that’s all I ended up thinking of.”

“Kicking paintball’s ass?”

“Kicking paintball’s ass.”

“Well, you succeeded there so at least there’s that. Seriously though dude, it’s okay. I can just drop you off—”

“Um, I think the *fuck* not. It’s your birthday and also barely past two thirty. We *have* to do something.”

Jake coughed, “I’m not the one who didn’t have a part two—”

“Aha! It was all a cleverly conceived strategy to trick you because I actually planned for all of this and I have—” Rich paused a moment to rummage through his wallet, “-this!” Triumphanty he held out a coupon for 25% off admission at the Lord Bellum Zoo.

“The zoo?” Jake asked.

“The zoo.” Rich confirmed, looking more confident than someone who relied on crumpled coupons from his wallet to save the day had the right to look.

“Okay then.” Jake waited as the GPS was set up. “Let’s go to the zoo.”

Jake had a theory that any activity you partake in is only as fun as you and the people you’re with make it. He was already aware that Rich was fun, (That was a bit of an understatement to say the least), but he appreciated it even more today, with how enjoyable Rich made the discounted zoo trip.

They meandered past all the pens, gaping at the large majestic animals like the lions and elephants and “Awwing” along with those around them at the sea otters, armadillos and in only Rich’s case, the giant yellow and white python slithering behind the glass enclosure.

“How is that in anyway cute?” Jake asked, eyeing nervously the intimidating looking python.

“Look at his charming little eyes! He’s adorable! I totally want a snake, maybe not a python—”

“Definitely not a python. They’re illegal for a reason.”
Rich tore his gaze away from the “adorable” snake, looking over at Jake.

“Pretty sure you’re just jealous that this snake is going to become my new, cutest best friend.”

“Okay, maybe, maybe this snake could become your new best friend. Maybe. Doubtful, but okay, let’s just say it happens. But there is no way, no way on God’s good green earth, that I could ever be replaced as cutest friend.”


“More like truthful.” Jake shot back.

Rich mock patronizingly patted his shoulder but Jake noticed his tone was sincere. “Fine, fine. You’re the cutest. Happy?”

Jake grinned. “Overjoyed.”

They moved on, but now every time they reached an animal even close to resembling the word cute—a baby chimp, a scurrying hedgehog-Jake would look to Rich and in a pleading voice ask, “I’m cuter than this, right?”

Everytime Rich would pretend to roll his eyes but then stare straight at Jake and repeat, “Yes. You are the cutest.”

“I don’t know, Jake. I think you’ve met your match.”

Jake looked down and almost retched at the disgusting looking banana slug.

“I hate you.”

“Happy birthday.”

The sun had yet to set by the time Jake was dropping Rich off back at his house.

“I have your gifts I swear-”

“You didn’t have to get me anything-”

“Yeah okay, sure. Anyway, I have the gifts but they’re not wrapped so you’re going to have to wait.”

“Sounds like a plan. Thanks, Rich, I had a lot of fun today.”

Rich returned the sentiments. As Jake was walking back to his car, he heard his best friend call out in a ribbing manner, “You know, you really are the cutest!”

“Yeah, I know!” Jake yelled back.

Before he drove out of Rich’s driveway, Jake gave in and finally checked his phone. There were a countless number of birthday messages on all his different social media platforms from friends and family—but not from the person he really wanted them to be from.
Despite the wonderful day he had and how contented he had felt walking away from Rich’s house, Jake felt kind of...sad, upon realizing Michael still hadn’t contacted him.

That was ridiculous. Why would he feel like that? It had been, what, two days since he had talked to Michael? That wasn’t a long time at all. So why did it feel like it?

The sad feeling increased, rather than disappeared, upon entering his house. That was due to the fact that he opened the front door and was immediately greeted by the faint sound of his parents arguing upstairs. Maybe everything wasn’t absolutely perfect.

He slammed the door closed, loud enough so that he knew they could hear.

“Mom, dad, I’m home!” The arguing stopped.

“Be down there in a minute!”

Jake slunked down on the couch, tired in more than one way. Out of habit rather than anything else, he took out his phone to mindlessly scroll through Instagram. That was probably how he would have ended his birthday night if his phone hadn’t dinged three seconds later with a text notification.

_Calm down, be chill._ Jake tried to tell himself when he found out it was from Michael.

Why was he getting so excited? Nothing about what he was feeling was making any sense so he decided to ignore it. At least for now.

_Hey can i come over in a few?_

Normally, Jake would have instantly said yes. But now, he was actually thinking, and it wasn’t good thoughts...What if Michael was trying to distance himself? That explained the absence. What if he was only hanging out with Jake because he had gotten roped into this fake dating charade?

They hadn’t brought up revealing it to their friends once, not since they first agreed to prank him in the first place. So much time had already passed-What if Michael thought he was wasting his time dating—well, fake dating Jake?

_Idk man I’m pretty tired I had a long day_

Obviously it was time for Jake and Michael to clear things up, but first Jake needed some time to clear things up within himself.

_Is everything okay?_
Yeah

Ten minutes passed before Jake realized there wasn’t anything he could’ve said that would have sounded less fine, and he was in the middle of typing out a better response when Michael sent another message.

Guess what

Jake deleted his message and instead typed out, What?

Im outside your house

What? The message was written out but never sent, because Jake couldn’t even find time to respond before being overrun with curiosity. He threw open the front door, jumped past the porch steps and frantically glanced around the yard for any signs of moment.

Nothing.

Jake could feel his forehead wrinkle in confusion. Had Michael been lying?

He waited a couple of minutes, but no one revealed themselves. Conflicted and disappointed, Jake began to head back inside. But then, from the side of his house came a very familiar sound.

The bounce of a basketball.

One bounce. Two bounce. Threefourfive bounce.

As casual as he could, Jake jogged over to the side of his house where he knew a basketball hoop, one that had been set up since he was nine years old, resided.

“Oh my god.” Were the first words out of his mouth upon seeing Michael standing, legs spread, arms resting on hips in a proud superhero pose, on Jake’s home basketball court. It wasn’t just the pose however, that was more the cherry on top of the cake.

The cake itself...Michael was wearing not only a loose fitting gray tank top, but also short shorts that would have been better suited on a volleyball court. It didn’t end there. Finishing the outfit was a hot pink headband haloing his head and two matching armbands of the same color decorating his wrists. In one arm, he was holding the basketball against his side.

“Hello, Jake.”

“What are you wearing?” Was all Jake could get out in that moment.
“My remaining dignity. Also my sister’s old basketball clothes. She was really into basketball and it was the only sports clothes in the house. I am not-”

“Into basketball. Or any sports.” Jake finished, remembering their conversation at the art gallery when he had been called ‘Mr. Muscular Legs.’

“Did you have to wear the armbands?”

“I think we both know the answer to that.”

After that, Jake had only one question left.

“Why?”

That took just a little more time to answer.

Michael took a breath. “Well, you kind of sounded...sad, over text-Which, I realize it’s kind of hard to interpret feelings over text but I could kind of-Well, not sense it, but like I thought that maybe if you were feeling sad, just in case, I could, you know, cheer you up. I figured the best way to do that probably involved me humiliating myself, plus you really love basketball so-”

“Michael?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

Michael smiled warmly, but it was quickly replaced by a false look of superiority.

“You won’t be thanking me when I kick your ass in basketball.” Michael forcefully passed Jake the ball.

“Check it.”

“I’m surprised you know that much.”

“Eat me.” Jake was pleasantly surprised that Michael was able to snap that phrase back without blushing.

“Maybe after I win.” Jake offered.

Ah, there was the blush.

Michael didn’t stand a chance. Jake completely dominated the small court and the only time Michael scored was when Jake let him, overcome with pity at how bad his boyfriend was losing.

But both boys had known that going into the scrimmage. Michael hadn’t come to win the game, or even to seriously verse Jake. He had come to cheer Jake up, and that had been a true success. How could Jake do anything other then laugh as he adoringly watched Michael fumble with the ball or double dribble and travel every two seconds?

They stopped as the sun began to rapidly descend below the horizon, both boys sticky with sweat.

Michael had dropped the ball, absolutely disgusted with the game, and turned to face Jake.
I vow to forever forsake this game. Never again.”

Jake loudly chuckled but he didn’t respond right away. He was looking, really looking, at tired, breathless Michael with such an intense stare that the boy looked away, self-conscious.

“What is it? Something on my face?”

They were standing very close to each other, inches away.

“Nothing. It’s nothing.” Jake breathed out. “Do you want to head inside?”

Michael was looking at him funny—or not directly at him, exactly. He was looking at his mouth; his lips.

“Yeah. Sounds go—Oh my god, my painting!” Suddenly Michael was off running towards the front of Jake’s house.

“What?” Jake called after him, more than confused. “What painting?”

Receiving no answer, Jake quickly followed Michael. He found him at the beginning of the porch steps, holding a medium sized rectangle wrapped neatly in brown paper.

“You said this was a painting?” Jake asked, interested in why exactly he had brought it here.

“Whoops.” Michael colored, “I guess I kind of ruined the surprise. It’s getting dark though, you won’t be able to really see it. Let’s go inside.”

The two boys walked inside; Michael led the way to Jake’s room as the boy stared wonderingly at the package he had been handed. What? Why? Also, what?

Jake didn’t receive any answers until they were both sitting on his bed, in similar fashion like on their first “date”.

Michael waited nervously for Jake to open the package, unsure why he hadn’t unwrapped it yet. His mouth opened to ask the question but before he could, Jake asked,

“What is this for, Michael?”

Michael stared at him. “It’s your birthday, Jake.”

Jake tried not to let the surprise show on his face, but he suspected in that measure he heavily failed.

“You know it’s my birthday?”

He was given a look that asked him if he was crazy. “Uh yeah, of course.” He smiled, “We’re boyfriends, remember?”

“How did you find out?”

“It was like one of the first questions we asked each other.”

The boy was touched. “You remembered?”
“Mm, yeah. Don’t you remember mine?” Michael teased. “April—”

“April 14th.” Jake grinned. “Yeah, I remember.”

Michael’s face was blooming red once more. “Okay, enough talk. Hurry up and open it. I’m getting anxious the longer it sits there.”

Eager to follow directions, Jake carefully tore through the thin paper wrapping.

This time he did nothing to hide his shock. His eyes widened comically, his mouth fell open. All that remained of his vocabulary were the three words he had uttered in the very beginning of their relationship.

“Holy shit, Michael.”

It was a portrait of Jake himself, in the same style as the first one he had laid eyes on; A distinguishing fashion that showed the deliberateness of each stroke.

The first thing he wondered upon seeing it was exactly what moment had Michael tried to capture. In the painting, his head was thrown back in laughter. The corner of his eyes were crinkled with smile lines; Jake could almost hear the happiness emanating from the picture.

He willingly admitted to the accuracy in which he had been painted. Michael managed to reproduce the seemingly exact color of his dirty blonde hair and he was fairly certain the shirt he was wearing in the portrait was also currently hanging up in his closet.

A varying viridescent shade composed the background, really bringing it all together.

Jake loved it.

Actually, saying he loved it didn’t even began to express how touched he was with this painting, nor how enamored he was finding himself with the painter, who was looking at him with restless eyes. Michael’s body language was impatiently fretful.

“Well? Do you like it?”

Jake would later say that he hadn’t meant to launch himself at Michael in the fiercest hug recorded in history but the truth was that it was the only possible way he could have reacted. There was no other manner he could think of to convey just how thankful he was, not just for the birthday present, but also for the boy himself.

“So…” Michael’s was speaking into Jake’s shoulder, voice muffled by the tight embrace that he found himself immediately reciprocating. “I take it you like it?”

After a moment Jake pulled away, almost embarrassed by how his emotions had suddenly overcome him, but then again not quite.

“Yeah, Michael. I like it a lot. I was actually planning on hiring a professional painter to paint a portrait of me but you saved me the trouble—”

Michael pushed him off the bed, and upstairs in their room, the animated discussion taking place between Mr. and Mrs. Dillinger paused, interrupted by the joyfully loud laughter of the two boys.
Laying flat against the floor and looking into the beaming eyes of Michael Mell, Jake smiled. And in his head, he added Michael to the list.

Chapter End Notes

HOLY SHIT, Y'all don't even know how much i adore your comments, they seriously make me so happy every time
i read them you guys are the absolutely niceST
That being said, I hope you enjoy this chapter. Michael in hot pink armbands wasn't in the original outline and then I realized
"
it *had® to happen
THANK YOU FOR READING
LEAVE ME COMMENTS BECAUSE THEY'RE ACTUALLY MY LIFESOURCE
I LOVE ALL OF YOU
~Till next time
you complete and utter rebel

Chapter Notes

mmmmsm short chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From Jakey:

Okay, I have a question

fire away kiddo

I’m older than you

And taller

Plus I’m really good at basketball

i thought u had a quesion

Qusetion

i’m leaving u

OKAY OKAY FINE

I actually have 3 questions

1. Do you like me

From Jeremy

hi

michael

*hi michael
hi

jeremy

hi jeremy

i gotta,,i gotta some stuff to say

can i call you?

normally u know i would say yes but i'm kind of...texting in church

you complete and utter rebel

ik ik im going to hell

can u say what you need to say over text?

you know what

yes i can

From Jakey:

yea ur pretty decent

Stupid auto correct you meant absolutely wonderful

But it’s okay I know what you were trying to say

Positive first answer, I like it

Okay

2. Do you like my parents

i have a feeling they're the nicest people alive
TWO FOR TWO NICE

Okay okay

Third and final question and then you're done

hit me with your best shot

Do you like camping?

From Jeremy:

so like

okay wait first im going to spam you and theres nothing you can do about it

but anyway

seriously

seriuosly

serouisly

its okay take ur time

SERIOUSLY

this was supposed to be serious

ur doing fine keep going

shut up i am

right okay

From Jakey:

do these questions happen to be related to each other in any way

You're sharp kid
You wanna go camping with the Dillinger’s?

heck yes
wait i've never been camping

All the more reason you should come
Btw my parents are all on board with inviting you
You’ve successfully swindled them

there is nothing swindling about my charming personality

Yeah yeah whatever you say

wait are your parents like...hardcore campers

like

Like no electric stoves and a really small tent and you start the fire with a piece of flint on the side of a mountain?

That type of hardcore camping?

ohhhhhh boy

oh geez

No don’t worry they're not like that at all

are you lying to me

What? I would never

That sounds sarcastic but it wasn’t supposed to be
Scout’s honor

-Image sent-

holy shit

you look absolutely adorable in your scout’s uniform

how old are you in this pic?

The tender camping-loving age of ten

From Jeremy:

i have recently realized after hours

,,,,

days

of stewing that i easnt entirely in the right

at the restaurant

like

you were right that was christines thing to tell and i shouldn’t have lashed out at you

i was just emotional i guess

*Dr. Phil Voice*

And why, were you emotional?

STOP MAKING ME LAUGH

i was e m o t i o n a l, dr phil, because

okay goodbye now

JEREMY WHAT

come back here we’re making progress

im back
just kidding i never really left
good to know good to know
would you like to continue?

yes i would thank you
i mean im basically done
essentially im sorry i was a jerk and i left you with the bill which was grossly unfair they overcharge their chicken parmigiana

From Jakey:
Wait so are you in

yeah why not ill suffer through it
when?

Next weekend
U have to bring a sleeping bag

thats fair
where tho
are there gonna be bears

We live in New Jersey

THERE ARE BEARS IN NEW JERSEY

Yeah black bears that's like the smallest kind

oh right silly me
black bears are the smallest so we should be safe if it tries to eat us
because you can just wrestle it
since its so small

I’m detecting a hint of…sarcasm

you should be detecting a fear of bears

From Jeremy:

so ya
ive said my peace
ill leave you to jesus

they do overcharge their chicken parmigiana you’re right
but thats okay i forgive youb

thanks michael
are we cool

yeah we’re cool
i was talking about me and jesus
but you and me are cool too

do you wanna hang out today
after your jam session ejth jesus

did you just call church a jam session with jesus
well you aint wrong
yeah sounds good ill come over after my jesus jam
From Jakey:

I’ll give you all the details

But don’t worry, it’ll be fun

100%

you’re making me doubt you

my first camping experience with my first boyfriend that’ll be interesting

we will have a separate tent from my parents ;)

jAKE STOP

HAHAHA

SEE YOU AT CAMPING

we have school tomorrow

...

See you tomorrow babe

From Player Two:

sounds good

and like really seriously thank you michael

for being so forgiving

and yknow

just in general a good friend

i wouldn’t be as tight as i am with jesus if i wasn’t forgiving my friend
yeah yeah whatever you say

ill see you today then

see you today

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are my life source,
Stay tuned~
Jake was very excited that Michael was going camping with him and his parents-A new tradition that he sincerely hoped his family would keep. It didn’t seem strange to him that he was so thrilled either. It was just one of the varied emotions he associated with Michael Mell and hanging out with Michael Mell and exchanging smiling kisses with Michael Mell and anything else that had to do with the boy.

There was nothing Jake could pinpoint exactly about what it was, but he didn’t think he needed to. It was hard trying to sort through everything he felt and honestly, Jake wasn’t the type of person to do that. He’d much rather just enjoy everything that was happening, moment by moment.

He had a feeling there’d be a lot of enjoyment during the trip.

The day before they were set to leave, a Friday, Jake’s parents had asked him to go shopping for the food supplies after school. Everything else, the tent, the sleeping bags, the bug spray, was carefully packed and loaded into the car. All they needed now was something for them to eat during the two days.

“Why don’t you ask Michael to go along with you, Jakey?” His mother suggested. “Grocery shopping is always more fun when you have someone with you.”

What an excellent idea.

Most of the times, when Jake had wanted to hang out with Michael, he would ask him as soon he first saw him at the beginning of school. That way Michael had the entire day to get permission from his parents and make sure nothing else popped up that he couldn’t avoid.

So Friday, Jake assumed of himself that he would start the same routine and ask about the grocery store.

That’s not what happened.

Instead he saw Michael, waved him over with a bright smile and opened his mouth to ask about it. But then, the words wouldn’t come out; they stayed frozen at the tip of his tongue instead.

It was not something he was used to.

With just a moment of silence after the initial greeting, Jake was starting a conversation off a random topic, wondering at the same time why he hadn’t been able to ask.

After a half hour of mulling it over, he figured it out. It was just a simple thought-Though to be fair, it
was not one he had experienced for a long time.

What if Michael didn’t want to hang out with him?

Where had that come from?

Well that took some more thinking and Jake reluctantly realized he was doing exactly what he hadn’t planned on; Sorting through everything.

Unfortunately, it seemed to be the only way of demanding answers from himself and since he did want to ask Michael before the end of the day…

Hours slowly passed as Jake spent class-time thinking through it, obtaining answers he didn’t particularly want.

By lunchtime, he had a general outline of thoughts formulated.

What if, what if the only reason Michael wanted to hang out with him was because he felt...confined to the fake relationship?

Usually, Jake never had to dwell on those types of thoughts because not only did they fail to appear often, but they were soon remedied. He was the most popular kid at school.

Everyone, it seemed, had wanted to hang out with him.

With Michael, it was different, and Jake didn’t know why.

You know, not dwelling on it sounded good.

That became his new plan. Don’t dwell on it. It lasted exactly two minutes when Michael was late for lunch, Christine saw his face and asked him what was wrong, and Jake promptly spilled everything to her.

Okay, maybe not everything. All he did was confide in her about what he was feeling, and pleaded for an explanation.

He hadn’t expected her to start laughing at him. Not mean laughing-Jake was pretty positive Christine didn’t have a mean bone in her body. It was more of a light chuckle than anything, also accompanied with a kind smile, but it still managed to stop Jake’s thoughts in their tracks.

What was so funny?
“It’s called doubt, Jake.” Christine informed him, immediately becoming sympathetic upon seeing his confusion, though not completely refraining from teasing him.

“And it’s a very common emotion for people who aren’t you.”

He gave her a look; she grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, Jake. Though it is kind of true—Er, my point is, is that it’s normal. Maybe even healthy, in small doses. And when you like someone, really like someone—” Christine fixed him with an expression that he was sure she knew he understood, “—There’s going to be some doubts. Because it’s new and you’re vulnerable.”

She patted his shoulder endearingly. “Let yourself be vulnerable. Talk to Michael about it, that’s a lot better then keeping it all holed up inside you.” Her tone was final, as if there were no points to argue. Just because Jake couldn’t think of any didn’t mean there weren’t some errors.

He took a deep breath and let it go. No, no, she was right and they both knew it. He could tell she knew it because her smile had turned to one of satisfaction, confident the message had gotten through.

Michael walked in just a little while later; Jake could see him searching the lunch tables for his friends. He waved Michael over after they caught each other’s gaze.

His face had immediately lit up with a happy smile and as he approached to where they were sitting, Christine leaned over one more time and whispered, “Anyone can see the way he’s looking at you, Jake.”

Michael had almost reached the table, steps away from hearing their words.

“So?” Jake asked, uncertain about so many things. “Looking at me like what?”

He could hear her tiny sigh, practically asking if she had to spell it out for him.

“He’s looking at you like you shouldn’t have any doubts.”

Christine’s advice was solid and by the end of the day, Michael had been asked. What had Jake been expecting? It didn’t matter now because he had been met with an enthusiastic yes; Michael also seemed to be fairly excited about their weekend trip.

For the rest of the school day, Jake could now breathe easy. A part of him just wanted to ignore the rest of her counsel—the talking to Michael about it part.

It seemed embarrassing to even imagine asking about it—and that’s another thing Jake most definitely wasn’t. Doubtful, or embarrassing.

But by the time they were pulling into the grocery store parking lot, Jake knew he had to confront
Michael. There was that unfamiliar nervous feeling in his stomach again, and this time he could admit with certainty that it was the fact that there was a chance—or possibly more than a chance, that Michael was hanging out with Jake due to...obligation. If that were true, it would mean that spending a weekend with him and his parents could theoretically be torture for Michael.

Internally, he was yelling with frustration. Jake had never thought this way with someone before, never feared that they didn’t actually want to be with him. Michael was changing everything.

Regardless, he had to make sure. So before they could enter, he tapped Michael’s shoulder and bashfully looked into his eyes.

“Michael, I wanted to ask you something.” It was a conscious effort not to trip over the words; he had practiced the simple sentence in his head before saying it.

Michael was smiling the same smile Jake had seen at the start of lunch, it had yet to go away. “Yeah, what’s up?”

“Before we like, go shopping, I just want to make sure that you... want to go camping.” He opted not to add, “With me.” How desperate was he planning on sounding today?

The boy standing in front of him looked very confused. “I said I wanted to do, didn’t I? Over text?”

“Yeah, yeah, you did.” Jake started walking forward again, hoping the motion would dispel any halting in the conversation.

He pulled out a cart and silently took a breath to gather resolve.

“I wasn’t sure if you said yes because you felt like you had to.”

Jake wasn’t looking at Michael, but he didn’t need to. His puzzled tone said enough. “Of course I would want to come. Why I ever feel like I had to come?”

“Oh you know,” Jake’s voice was straining to be casual. “Because of the whole...fake relationship. I don’t want you feeling like you’re obliged to hang out with me.”

Christine wasn’t the only one laughing at him today. Michael was positively grinning.

“You’re absolutely ridiculous, Jake. Of course I want to hang out with you.”

Jake felt his heart pound as Michael rolled his eyes in his direction. The boy snatched the list of items and glanced at it, staring wide at a couple of them

“Three packages of hotdogs, Jesus, how many people are coming?”

Jake grabbed the list back, his tone defensive. “My parents like to be prepared!”

“That’s thirty hot dogs, Jake.”

Michael received a withering look. He cleared his throat and tried not to smile, “Anyway, since you had to ask in the first place, I’ve decided on my own with no previous events influencing this choice, to show you.”
Jake could easily pick out the words he had confidently expressed to Michael on their first group trip to the mall. He raised an eyebrow, the edges of his lips tilting up with it.

“Show me what exactly?”

“Show you that I want to hang out with you—I thought that was pretty obvious from the inflection, Jake—”

Jake snorted loudly and wheeled the cart through the entrance.

“YOU HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION TO INFLECTIONS, JAKE.” Michael yelled, still standing in the parking lot.

He wasn’t sure if Michael noticed, but Jake found himself almost constantly looking at him out of the corner of his eye. As he threw a total of 30 hotdogs into the cart with a sarcastic, “The campsite will be very happy when they find out your parents are feeding everyone.” As they strolled down the aisles stocking up on gatorade.

There was something about him, something that hadn’t been there before when they were first hanging out.

_He’s a lot more confident_, Jake thought, sure that that was it. His remarks, his tone—Even his posture, It all radiated something he hadn’t had before. Or maybe it had always been there, and Jake was only now getting to see it.

Regardless of which it was, he was glad he had the privilege of experiencing it. It made Michael’s smile brighter, added a sparkle to his eyes. Or that could have been Jake imagining things…

“Only three items left. Ingredients for s’mores.” Michael said with a wicked grin. Jake got the feeling his boyfriend was a complete sweet tooth.

Together, they maneuvered the cart into the aisle, grabbing more packages of graham crackers then they realistically needed, as the list said. Then they moved on to marshmallows.

“Which ones should we get?”

“Well if we’re planning to actual fit them in our mouths, regular. Here, catch.”

There was a reason Michael wasn’t on any sports team. Despite their close proximity to each other, Michael chucked it and it zoomed past Jake’s head; his reflexes not quick enough to grab it.

He looked behind him at the sad package of marshmallows lying pathetically on the shiny grocery store floor. Then he stared back at Michael.
“Have you ever, ever heard of aiming?”

Michael’s face flushed red. “Have you heard of death by marshmallows?”

“Death by-”

“Marshmallows, bitch!”

Suddenly Jake was being attacked by packages of marshmallows. He was laughing so much that it was hard to breathe.

“Oh my god, Michael. We have to clean this up before a worker sees.” They had made a mess of, luckily still sealed, bags of marshmallows and it was a miracle someone hadn’t seen them yet.

Well there was one old lady who had given them a dirty look, but Jake’s stomach was heaving from their hysterics and her glare had only made it worse.

Once it had died away, leaving only aching chests, they cleaned it all up as best as they could while cracking up every other five seconds.

“I had no idea your language was so dirty, Michael Mell. I think that hurt more than the marshmallows.”

“A jock hurt by marshmallows. What has this liberal world come to?”

They approached the checkout lines, cackling even more when Michael tripped over a “Wet floor” sign, until suddenly he stopped, his face draining of all humor.

“Oh my god.”

Jake stared, “What?”

Michael looked over the contents in their cart. “We forgot the marshmallows.”

Jake approached the checkout line as Michael ran off to get the final item they had somehow missed. He began stacking all the items on the conveyer belt without even looking at the cashier when a familiar voice asked,

“Paper or plastic?”

Jake looked up into the eyes of Jeremy, appearing different from school only by the lack of a backpack and the addition of a green apron, who apparently hadn’t noticed either who was standing in front of him.
“Hey Jeremy! So this is the store you’re working at. You wanna cut us a discount?”

Jeremy’s eyes widened in recognition. “Hi, Jake. Yup, this is the store. What’s with the stock up of food?”

“My family is going camping this weekend.” Jake explained. “They have a tendency to go just a little overboard.”

“I don’t see it.” Jeremy joked as he rang up the third package of hotdogs. “And sorry no discounts.” He opened his mouth to continue, but then the crease of his brow suddenly furrowed. “You said ‘Cut us a discount.’ Who els-”

“Take that!” Michael yelled at the top of his lungs while running full speed towards Jake.

“Michael, be careful the wet-” Was as much as Jake could get out before he was being smacked in the face by marshmallow. His warning was unheard by Michael, who continued sprinting and promptly slipped on the slick floor. Luckily, Jake was right there to catch him as he fell forward.

It all happened so fast. One blink later, Michael was being supported by the strength of Jake’s arms. Their faces were inches away from each other, close enough for Jake to notice the smile lines currently crinkling at the edges of Michael’s eyes as he breathlessly grinned.

“Got the marshmallows.” He panted, neither of them moving from the strange position they had found themselves in. At least, not until there was a loud clearing of the cashier’s throat.

Michael tore his eyesight away from Jake and let out a little sound of exclamation as he caught sight of Jeremy. As quickly as possible, he righted himself and tried to control the quick breaths that came from dashing through the store.

“Jeremy! Hey!”

“Hi.” The tone of Jeremy’s voice was much different from what it had previously been with Jake. In fact, he was even staring at something Jake would have labeled as resentment if he truly believed Jeremy was aiming that mean look towards him. Maybe it was just resting bitch face.

“What’s uh-How’s your day going?” Michael asked. His voice sounded like it was struggling to remain normal.

“It’s fine.” Jeremy said curtly, checking out the items now at an impressively fast pace. “I guess you’re going camping with the Dillinger’s?”

“Yeah, yeah...That-that I am.”

“Ah, cool. I hope you have fun.”

“Thanks.”

Jake looked back and forth curiously between Michael and Jeremy, best friends, as the air between them remained both silent and charged.
The only time talking resumed was when Jeremy gave him the total, which Jake paid with the money his parents had given him.

“See you guys later then.” Jeremy’s voice was tight and he didn’t look at them as he said that.

Michael gave the smallest of waves, but his eyebrows were furrowed with concentration, as if he was trying to convey a very important message to Jeremy simply with intense thought. Of course, he couldn’t actually, so after a second of tense nothingness, Michael took a step back towards the entrance. Suddenly he was looking...sad.

Sad didn’t really seem to capture it though. It looked more like a swirling mixture of feelings like disappointment, exasperation-Possibly even anger. It was like they were all fighting for control over Michael’s expression.

Then it was over, Michael was remarking, “Yeah, see you later.” In a distant tone, and his face was a mask of calm.

Jake was still staring as they walked out of the store and started loading the groceries into the car, but this time for a different reason. Whatever the reason for what had occurred between Jeremy and Michael, it seemed to have shaken the boy.

The drive to Michael’s home was conducted in silence; For once Jake couldn’t the words to say. Or maybe it was that he knew silence was the best course to take right now.

Of course walking up to his front door, Jake couldn’t help but say something.

“I-um, I’ll see you tomorrow, Michael.” Then again, he didn’t have anything of true substance to say. Maybe he should have just stayed silent-

“Jake, I’m really sorry about what happened at the store. It was weird and the thing is, it’s not like Jeremy and I are fighting right now. We’re like-Well I’m honestly not sure what’s even happening between us-” The words came out fast and hurried, like water from a faucet.

“But now it’s weird between him and me and probably weird between you and me and everything’s weird. ” He took a deep breath, “And now I keep on using the word weird, and that’s weird and everything’s we-”


Michael grimaced, obviously not believing the words. “Are you sure? Because that-It was-”

“Dude. It wasn’t weird. I mean maybe the use of the word weird was a little...strange.”

Michael cracked a smile and Jake knew everything would be good, his hands dropped off. “Friends fight, they have arguments. That’s normal. It doesn’t need an explanation.”
Jake grinned as he witnessed Michael’s face relaxing. Maybe he had been over thinking things-Like Jake had been today. Christine had helped him and hopefully Jake was helping Michael with it in some way.

“And you know,” Jake offered, “A weekend away from all of that-You can have some time to think it over. That’ll probably be good.”

“You’re sweet, Jake but I promise I won’t be annoyingly distracted on this trip.” He raised four fingers with a mischievous smile. “Scout’s honor.”

“It’s three fingers.”

Michael dropped a finger, leaving only the middle one up. “Fixed it.”

Their laughter was interrupted by the opening of the front door, revealing Michael’s mom. She was a slightly heavy set women; Jake immediately recognized the same questioning gaze frequently worn on her son, not to mention the similar dark, thick brown hair and prominent looking features. She leaned against the doorway, not looking nearly as surprised as the two boys in front of her.

“I thought I heard voices out here.” Jake, who always considered himself rather good at reading people, was having an extremely hard time with Michael’s mom.

“Oh, hello, Mrs. Mell, I’m Jake Dillinger.” He held out a hand which she slowly shook. Jake finally received the distinct expression he was being judged.

“The Jake Michael talks about, I presume? It’s good to meet you, Jake.” She turned to her son. “It’s time to be getting inside, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, got it, mom. I’ll be inside in a couple of minutes.”

She nodded, satisfied with that and gave a final look at Jake. Suddenly the judgement was over and she was stepping inside saying nothing more than a quiet, “And try to keep it down, Michael, your father is sleeping.”

They waited a moment after she closed the door before speaking again.

“Your mom seems...nice.”

Michael gave a sort of smirk, “Yeah, it takes a while before she warms up to someone. That’s kind of just the person she is.”

“I can see it in her son a little bit.” Jake paused, “Do they know about...us?”

Michael vehemently shook his head. “No, no. Not in any way, shape or form.”

“That makes sense.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I should probably get inside and go to bed. We have a big day tomorrow.”
“Yup, definitely. I’m picking you up early.” Jake winked.

Michael let out a groan, “Lord, help me. I am *not* a morning person.”

“Don’t worry, I already told you it won’t be that bad. You’ll be able to bear through it.”

“You know what? I think I will too. I’ll see you tomorrow Jake.”

Michael’s statement had been accurate; the boy was not a morning person. He had loaded himself and his weekend bag into Jake’s car, eyes groggy and for the most part, completely silent. The hood from his signature hoodie was up and Jake got the impression that Michael wanted to pull it over his face and cinch it tight.

“Woah...What’s wrong, Michael?”

“I told you, Jake.” His voice was grumpy and he was trying to use the seatbelt as a pillow. “I’m not a morning person.”

Jake stared wonderingly, first at the slumped body in the passenger seat and then at the digital car time displayed above the radio.

“Michael... It’s 11’o clock.”

The campsite was an hour away and by the time they reached it, Michael had perked up considerably. Jake would even go so far as to say he seemed bubbly; the same type of excitement he had had in fifth grade for his first camping trip.

They met up with his parents there, exchanging quick pleasantries before going off to set up their respective tents.

The tent Jake had for him and Michael was small, a simple two-person tent that he hoped the boy wouldn’t mind. While setting it up, he instructed Michael on what to do and how to help. He picked it up fast and soon they were proudly looking together at a fully set-up tent, only slightly perspired from the bright sun overhead.

The day passed quickly, much quicker than Jake expected. They used the hours to explore the camp grounds; hiking only some of the extensive trail, discovering the lake that had been advertised in the brochure and promising each other to save it for tomorrow (Today was more of an investigating type day anyway.). They had even made friends with a family of campers at another nearby site.

By the time they came back from surveying as much as they could of the day tomorrow, mentally marking everything they couldn’t fit in today’s schedule, the sun was dipping below the horizon.

His parents had already managed to start-up a now roaring fire which a grille was placed over and the hotdogs were ready for roasting.
Two growing boys demolished more than their fair share of dinner, but even that combination could not devour all thirty hotdogs, which only served in Jake pushing away Michael’s smug grinning face when his parents commented on it.

They all thought they were stuffed but that didn’t last long either, except now they were hungry for something else. Dessert.

After several failed attempts of marshmallows falling off of sticks and mean comments about the certain way one toasted their marshmallows, (You know, it’s not supposed to undergo a complete color change like that.” “BURNT TASTES BETTER, JAKE.”), the air was silent save for the chirping of crickets and the satisfied smacking of lips.

Soon after putting the foodstuff away, Jake’s parents announced they would retire to their tents. The boys just had to make sure to remember the rules; fires out by eleven and relative quiet by twelve.

The boys would have no problem following those rules. Their voices were already hushed as Michael’s head rested on Jake’s shoulder, having a conversation about nothing in particular. The fire had yet to die down and the warmth was blasting Jake’s face. Coupled with the overwhelming amount of sweets and food, he was positively content.

It seemed likely they both fell asleep in front of the fire. Suddenly Jake’s eyes were open with no recollection of ever going to sleep. Michael was still resting against him, breathing deeply and soundly. The night was still filled with the sound of insects, but it was almost an eerie experience to wake up and not have anyone else around.

With small movements, Jake reached into his pocket and brought out his phone, squinting at the bright light that displayed the time. 11:45 p.m.

Nothing but glowing embers remained of the fire anyway. As comfortable as he was now, which to be fair wasn’t extremely comfortable-his back kind of ached, actually-Jake reluctantly woke Michael up.

After dousing the hot coal with a nearby water bottle, the two sleepy boys retired to bed, which for tonight would be their respective sleeping bags. On the brink of unconsciousness, it was all Jake could do to mumble out a bleary “Goodnight, Michael.” Barely catching the equally tired “Goodnight” back.

Jake wasn’t expecting to wake up a second time that night. But he did, and it happened all at once, just like before-Even despite the fact that once it happened the only thing that registered for a full minute was the feeling of unbridled fear.

“Fire.” The word had been on his lips ready to scream, the smoke in his lungs, the heat on his skin. He had been sure of it. As time slowly ticked by however, time spent tightly gripping the edge of his sleeping bag and breathing silently through his nose, Jake came to the firm conclusion that it had just been a bad dream.

It had been months since he had had a nightmare like that, and he wasn’t exactly sure what has caused it tonight. Though some intuitive part of him felt compelled to blame it on the complete stillness and clarity a quiet night provided. Even in his subconscious, it was easier to think
of...everything.

With the mental passing of minutes gone by, Jake cautiously allowed himself to think back on the dream. There was the undefined feeling of knowing you didn’t remember everything, but maybe in this case that was a good thing.

It was no mystery what it had been about; quite obviously the burning down of his house. This one seemed worse than the others he had experienced though, it had felt so real.

In the dream, Jake had been standing in the foyer of his home, shoes held to the floor by an unseen force. Not being able to move, there was nothing he could do but bear witness to the screaming of people—Screams both ripped straight from memory and imagined—especially screams of those he cared about, trapped in the burning flames. The fire devoured the house quickly, much faster than it actually had in real life, and Jake woke up, teeth gritted, just as the flames reached forward to lick the soles of his feet.

He was unaware of how much time was going by but it became impossible for him to go back to sleep, consequence of both the fear of having the dream repeated and the fact that he was now just...awake. It was a sensation of being tense and wired, waiting for something that wasn't going to come, and Jake couldn’t shake it. Not at first at least.

After a while however, the smooth and rhythmic breathing of the boy next to him helped soothe his thoughts. The sequence of his intakes and outtakes infiltrated, and replaced everything else in Jake’s mind.

He almost believed that he’d be able to go back to sleep when the pattern abruptly stopped. Across from him, Michael’s breathing hitched, pausing for a moment before escalating in pace.

Jake quickly looked over at what was happening, confused and conflicted as to whether or not he should wake Michael up. It wasn’t like the boy was thrashing or anything like that, but he did look like he was...struggling, just slightly.

Once it became more apparent, him writhing around in his constraining sleeping bag, Jake decided the best option would be to rouse him. He wriggled out of his own bag, quickly kneeling beside Michael who remained unaware.

“Michael, Michael! Wake u-” Jake was just about to put a hand on his shoulder and shake him when Michael responded.

“Please, don’t.”

Or-He couldn’t be responding to the boy kneeling by him—His eyes were still tightly closed. But his voice was as clear as if he were engaging in an ordinary conversation. He must have been responding to someone in a dream.

It wasn’t the only words he was saying but it was the only clear sentence. The rest of them were just snatched phrases, incomplete to what he thought was happening. They were just singular words, meaningless to some...To most actually. But after a moment, Jake could guess what he was dreaming about.
“Optic n-”

“Michael, wake up! You’re having a bad dream.”

“Upgr-Upgrade.”

“Michael! You need to wake up!”

“Don’t l-Stop-”

“Michael!”

“Don’t leave me!” Michael woke up in a manner completely opposite of Jake’s. He woke up gasping, the words he had been trying to speak not resting on his lips but rather flying through the heavy air. He had shot up with the force of being jolted from sleep, and it took a couple of seconds to place where he was. Jake was so close he could see the disorientation in Michael’s eyes.

Of course, that also meant he was close enough to see the tears. They were forming fast and soon threatened to overflow.

Before Jake could even think about what he was doing, he gently wiped away the gleaming drops about to streak down his cheek. And then he was embracing him, clutching him desperately tight until the rapid, shallow breaths of Michael’s stopped and the tears dried and they became simply two boys holding on to each other in a small, cramped tent on a warm, quiet night.

Once it seemed to pass, as the barest glimmer of morning light attempted to shine through their tent, Michael pulled away slightly. He looked up at Jake with puffy, red eyes. “I’m sorry.” Were the first words spoken that day.

Before they could even really get out of his mouth, Jake was rebuking him for it. “You have literally nothing to apologize for.” And partly because there seemed to be nothing else that could be said, but also because it was just the type of person he was, Jake tried to weakly joke, “I guess I’m not the only one who had a bad dream tonight.”

The filled atmosphere didn’t alleviate, but then again, had Jake really expected it to? Instead, Michael quietly asked, “What was your dream about?”

It had been the same thing Jake was going to ask him, but since Michael had asked first, “It was about the fire. The one at my house.” He took a collecting breath before In the dream I was like, stuck. I couldn’t move. And I keep-I kept hearing people I know screaming throughout the house.” He felt Michael shudder against him. Maybe he shouldn’t have gone into such detail, especially considering Michael was recovering from his own bad dream.

Jake was surprised then, when Michael quietly commented, “I used to dream about the night of the fire too.”

“Really? Did you get hurt that night?”

“No, no. Not physically anyway. There were people shouting about the fire and banging the door so I got out and ran downstairs. That was before it got really bad. But the police accounted for everyone, Jake. It turned out...Well, not okay exactly, but better then it could have been.”
“Yeah, you’re right.” Jake replied, thinking over what Michael had said. “I would say it’s useless to dream and feel guilty about it, but you—”

“You can’t control nightmares.” Michael was speaking with familiarity.

“Wait. What did you mean by you didn’t get hurt physically? Did you get hurt in some other way?”

Michael was looking down at the thin covering that was the tent floor, maybe deciding whether or not to confide in Jake. After a moment, he began.

“It’s fine now, just so you know. But when Jeremy got the squip, he-Well you already know that he was my only friend and then stuff happened and after...After everyone got saved, that’s what my nightmares were about.”

“What stuff?”

Michael still wasn’t looking at him. With the softest touch, Jake grabbed Michael’s chin and redirected his gaze. “If you don’t want to, you know you don’t have to. But if you feel like talking about it, I’m here.”

“I know.” Michael whispered. The tears, urged on by the emotion of the night, began to appear again. “I know you're here.”

Michael did end up telling Jake about everything that happened. In small increments at first, taking breaks whenever he felt overwhelmed. Then the words were flowing out, and Jake got the feeling Michael didn’t just want to tell someone about this, he needed to.

He knew himself that trying to keep everything you were feeling and experiencing pent up—Well, it’s not good to say the least.

So, he learned about Michael being ignored as if he were invisible, “Like-Like I knew that I didn’t matter and it was just being confirmed-”

He learned what happened in the bathroom and the way Michael felt like he was being torn apart inside.

He learned all of it.

Jake didn’t hold it against Jeremy. Or at least, he tried not to. He knew how persuasive—more than persuasive, the Squip was, and students like Rich and Jeremy had experienced it for the longest time.

But that didn’t mean his heart didn’t ache for Michael, as if the hurt was his own.

Jake comforted him as best as he knew, and for a long time the boys didn’t let go of each other. Not until the sun was rising high, ready for another day. Not until their legs were aching from the position they were sitting in. Not until his parents were calling from outside the tent, wondering why they were so tired.

When they did finally get up, Michael’s eyes had dried but somehow they were still shining.
“I feel—I feel so much better. You don’t even understand, Jake, how good—You—You really—” He couldn’t find the words. “Thank you. A lot.” Or at least, Jake thought Michael couldn’t find the words.

But as they were about to step out of the tent, ready to greet his parents, Michael stopped him with a tender kiss to the lips. Jake could still taste the salt from the drops that had fallen. “You know, you would make a really good boyfriend.” He smiled sweetly. “A great boyfriend.”

Michael unzipped the tent and stepped out, squinting at the bright sun.

Jake stayed inside for a moment, never before having been fazed by a kiss.

He felt his heart swell.

Chapter End Notes

At first I thought you guys were joking when some of you said that I was making you ship Pins and Patches and some people were sad because there’s literally no content about this ship. Okay I didn’t think you were joking but I thought there had to be something. yEAH LIKE 4 POSTS ABOUT IT. Of course the fanart that I have seen, is absolutely beautiful and I am astounded because holy shit was it cute. And in one of the captions it even mentioned my fic so I got a ’lil, a ’lil puffed up chest, but other than that-I have searched the tags (alas only Instagram, I'm not on tumblr) for #pinsandpatches (so many pins and patches but not the ship you feel me) #prepgame (literally only sports) and #michaelxjake, which so far has been the most fruitful with about...two posts.

Here’s a formal apology for making you ship something that has no content, at the very least know you know I'm suffering too. bUT NOT AS MUCH AS Y’ALL WILL BE IN THE UPCOMING CHAPTERS I AM PUMPED.

Of course this chapter was pretty angsty in itself but we good, we good.

AS ALWAYS, I adore every single one of you, I'm always open to talking about anything hmw with any subject, and of course as a slut for validation, your comments and kudos increase my lifespan by 45+

Bless you all
Stay tuned
The end of Michael’s weekend, Sunday morning to the afternoon, was good. Great. Wonderful.

Nice.

The Sunday night however, the Sunday night that began and contrasted to a decent week, was not however. It hurt to think about, a little bit.

Okay, a lot.

Especially since the days before had been so good. The stark difference he had experienced coming home from not only hanging out with Jake but the peacefulness that the woods provided was...almost too much.

It was his own fault, too. It took a little while for him to come to terms with that. He wanted to blame anyone and everything else. Camping for making him loosely relaxed. Jeremy for distracting his thoughts during dinner. Everyone at school for constantly commenting on his relationship with Jake, the way talking about it so openly fooled himself into thinking that it was real.

But, in the end the blame couldn’t truly be placed on any of that. It was his mistake; he slipped up in talking to his parents.

After it happened Michael spent the entire night lying in bed, eyes aching from exhaustion but refusing to close. He mentally reviewed the past two days. First what happened when he came home, and then the previous day spent with Jake.

He worked it over in his mind, backwards.

*Michael stormed down angrily to his room.*

*The fierce arguing with his dad abruptly ended when he demanded Michael’s phone.*

*His mom sat at the table quietly, not commenting on the matter.*

*Their voices began to rise in volume.*
His dad rose from the kitchen table, still yelling; Michael did the same, copying his movements.

His mom didn’t receive an answer when she quietly asked, “How long, Michael?”

The expression on his dad’s face would have been comical if it wasn’t so scary. Red and angry, as if he were going to explode.

“Watch your goddamned mouth-”

“We’ve been over this before, that’s not how it fucking works-”

“I didn’t raise a-”

Words. Words. Words.

Michael focused solely on his dad, anxiously watching his reaction. He had fucked up. Bad.

“Yes. That’s what I was going to say. I-I was going to say boyfriend.”

“Finish the word, Michael. Were you-” His father took an incredulous breath, “Were you going to say he’s your boyfriend ?”


Surprise. Shock. Disbelief.

A moment of, What did I just hear?

“Well yeah,” Michael’s reply was the epitome of casual. Why wouldn’t it be? He had repeated this
phrase at school to everyone who asked him about their relationship. “He’s my boyfri-

Then a sharp noise, almost like a grunt from his father. “You sure are spending a lot of time with this Jake. I mean, a camping trip with his parents?”

A small smile from his mother at hearing her son talk so happily.

“We roasted s’mores, went swimming in a lake, looked at the stars. It was really cool being out there, no sound except crickets who like never shut up.”

Michael was surprised at himself. So easily telling his parents about how the trip went. Talking over dinner like a normal...Like normal.

“So how was your trip?”

They filled up their plates.

Sat down at the table.

He skipped up the stairs, two at a time.

“Michael!” He could hear his mom’s voice resonating the kitchen, even from downstairs.

“Dinner’s ready!”

Michael began unpacking his clothes from his bag, chucking them all in the dirty pile, a content smile on his face as thought of how he spent his weekend.

Jake had dropped him off around 8:30 p.m., both boys tiredly content from the filled day they had had.
And that was it. It was all those simple moments that had led to one huge moment that Michael was certain would have horrible consequences. What would his parents do? How were they reacting right now? He could hear them heatedly talking to each other underneath him, but they weren’t yelling loud enough for him to make out what they were saying.

They had already known he was gay- and ironically Michael thanked God for the fact that he had already come out. If his dad had learned about it all in one night...Jesus, he’d probably have a heart attack.

There was nothing to be done, nothing he could do. He knew that. In fact he was resigned to that fact. But sleep still wouldn’t come until hours had passed and he was sure he had considered every possible outcome. For the first time in a long time he was glad school was tomorrow; it would serve as a refuge.

As it turns out, no it would not. Two hours before school started, a message was sent out by the superintendent informing students and parents of a major utility issue. What a lucky turn of events for everyone, school was cancelled.

Of course that didn’t stop Michael’s dad from going to work, so his son was still spared...Mostly.

Michael almost had his own heart attack when his mother loudly cleared his throat from the kitchen table, interrupting what he thought was his ninja-silent rummaging through the fridge for lunch. A yelp of sorts escaped him, and he considered it a small victory when his mom tried to suppress a smile at that. It went away too quickly though, and Michael realized she wanted to discuss something serious with him.

What could it be about? He had a few guesses.

In fact, it was so blatantly obvious that his mom didn’t even bother to mention what it was about.

“Your dad said that you’re grounded. For two months.”

“Two months?”

“I got it down to two weeks.”

“Oh. That’s-Thanks, mom.”

“You know what it means. No hanging out with friends after school. Straight there and straight home.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“He’s keeping your phone too, for at least a week.”

Michael had still been looking through the refrigerator, taking out ingredients for a sandwich, but at that he turned and faced his mom.

“I’m not breaking up with Jake.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Is dad?”
“Not anymore. He’s not happy about it, however.”

“There’s a surprise.” Michael turned back around, not able to look at his mom for this next question. “What do you think about it?”

“I only met the boy for a couple of seconds.” She chuckled just slightly, “He seemed nervous.”

Michael laughed. “He usually never is.”

“Standard mom reply, Michael, as long as you’re happy I’m happy. And as long as you’re not hurting anyone.”

“I’m not. At least I don’t think I am.” He smiled at her.

“Are you still hanging out with Jeremy?”

"Yeah, of course." Michael said, irritated at how defensive he sounded, especially because it caused his mom to raise an eyebrow. "In fact I was gonna hang out with him today." Well he hadn't actually planned anything, but how many times had they surprised each other popping up randomly on their doorsteps?

"I can just text him." Michael felt for his phone at the same time his mom curiously looked at him, instantly reminding him.

"Did you forget you're grounded?"

No. I definitely did not forget." Michael had, but his mom didn't need to know that.

He finished making his sandwich and tried to think of how he could spend a day with no communication. There was always video-

"Your dad took your console thingy." His mom's voice rang out behind him as he walked down the stairs.

Games.

Guess not.

Well...He'd find something to do.

As the light from the dawning sun began to filter through his curtained windows, Michael rubbed his aching eyes and acknowledged he had lost control.

He had finished reading Pride and Prejudice late in the afternoon, (It was his mother's and he was curious, okay?) and had spent the thirty minutes after that both daydreaming about Mr. Darcy and debating whether he should start another book.

On one hand, he might get into it so much that he wouldn't go to sleep until he finished it and who knows how long that would be. On the other hand, how was he going to spend four hours until a reasonable bedtime without his phone, Xbox or books?

Michael had looked guiltily as the art supplies stacked in the corner. He had even grabbed his pencil and pad, hoping motivation would come sometime along the way.

Five minutes passed before he realized his urge to waste time was bigger then his urge to create and so he dropped it to the side.
Reading it was. And that's what lead it to being 6:04 a.m., Michael closing the cover of *Unbroken, a WWII Memoir* with an accomplished finality.

To the side of him, his alarm clock broke into a horribly loud, rhythmic beeping.

Time for school.

To say he could barely function throughout the day was an understatement. Jeremy woke him up with an amused expression in two different classes, and it wasn't until lunch that Michael noticed Jake was and had been absent throughout the entire day.

His forehead was pressed against the cool, slightly sticky (He wasn't going to think about it) top of the cafeteria table, loud conversations erupting all around him.

He asked whoever was next to him where Jake was but it came out as more of a disgruntled groan.

"What did you say?" Rich asked, voice slightly concerned. "I'm not fluent in zombie."

"I said, 'Where is Jake.'" Michael repeated, making a concerted effort to sound coherent.

"Oh, he had a tick from camping and then he had a slight fever so his parents immediately thought he had lyme disease-" Rich laughed, "So they took him to the hospital but it turned out just to be a regular fever. To stay safe they're keeping him home though."

"Oh."

He felt a presence next to him and exhaustedly turned his head, coming face to face with Jeremy who had copied his position; head down on the table.

"Hey Michael."

"Hey Jeremy."

Michael hadn't talked to him since they had seen each other in the grocery store, which had been weird, for reasons that Michael couldn't name. Maybe if he had been anywhere near clear consciousness, Michael would have acted more...formal. Would have been more careful and constructed about what he was saying, definitely wouldn't have mentioned anything being different between them.

But Michael was so goddamn tired-He really needed a nap-Much too tired to keep up a pretense that he wasn't even sure *why* it was there or what it was, and did he mention he was exhausted?

So he stared into the bright blue eyes of his best friend, embodied the phrase of "Too Tired to Care" and mumbled out, "Have things been *strange* between us?"

Jeremy wasn't expecting him to bring it up either, it seemed. His gaze widened, his eyebrows raised. "Uh...What-What do you think?"

Michael didn't even hesitate. "Yeah, I think it has. And I dunno *why*. Do you know *why*?"

Jeremy's expression furrowed. "No, I-uh, I don't think so."
"Yeah, well I'm tired of it!" Michael declared, except it was in such a soft voice, laced with such a heavy slur that Jeremy could barely understand it. "So both of us need to stop it right now. K?"

Jeremy laughed, a quiet chuckle. "Okay, I agree with that. No more strangeness."

Michael let out a breath, satisfied with how the conversation went. "Good. I'm glad. You're my best friend, Jeremy, y'know?"

"Yeah, I know. What is it, I-I texted you asking if you wanted to hang out but you just read it. You didn't answer. Do you- Um, do you have plans?"

Now it was Michael's turn to look confused, until he remembered. "Oh, I don't have my phone. My dad took it."

"What did you do this time?"

Michael slapped his arm weakly.

"I told my parents I was dating Jake. On accident."

"Ah...I see. How did they respond?"

"Well I don't have my phone so what do you think?"

"Point taken."

Michael thought for a moment. "I still want to hang out though."

"Well, how long are you grounded?"

"Two months."

"Two months?"

"Wait no, two weeks. My mom got it down to two weeks."

"That's a little better. I was about to say..."

Michael lifted his head up from the table only to bang it back down in defeat. "What if we skip school tomorrow?"

"Uh, I don’t know. What if we get caught? That’ll put you in a lot more trouble."

"I didn’t take you for a nerd, Heere."

Jeremy snorted and rolled his eyes. "Fine. But if we get in trouble, it’s totally on you."

"Well, yeah. You think my mom is going to ground you?"

"Tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow."

"What if we skip school tomorrow?"

"Uh, I don’t know. What if we get caught? That’ll put you in a lot more trouble."

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Jeremy snorted and rolled his eyes. "Fine. But if we get in trouble, it’s totally on you."

"Well, yeah. You think my mom is going to ground you?"

"Tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow."
Of course this was not the boys’ first time skipping school, but the key was to do it so infrequently no one would catch on. It had been months since they both were fed up enough to skip a day, so Michael figured they’d be in the clear.

He met up with Jeremy by a large fountain in the town centre after expertly ditching his schoolbag in a large bush in the Mell’s backyard. Usually Jeremy would pick the activity and Michael would be more than happy to go along; after all they were so similar, mostly anything Jeremy enjoyed Michael would too.

Today however, Michael was deciding and he had the perfect place. It wasn’t a huge place, and no adult they knew would be there at eight-thirty in the morning so it was guaranteed safe. Jeremy listened to Michael explain all this as he tightly laced up his ice skates.

“I mean, I haven’t been ice skating since I was like, nine years old, but I think I remember it being fun. And how hard can it be? It feels like these skates are trying to kill me, but that’s how it’s supposed to be right?”

“Uh, I think so?”

“You look kind of sick.” Michael astutely commented as they stepped up the rink. He knew how crowded it could get by mid-afternoon, but barely anyone was here now. A dedicated looking young skater off to one side practicing a waltz jump over and over and a younger couple skating around together. They practically had the rink to themselves.

“Yeah, I feel kinda sick. My-Uh, my mom used to take me here when I was younger.”

“Oh. Oh.”

Michael turned to Jeremy who really wasn’t looking his best; face clammy and palms, Michael was sure, were sweaty. “Hey, we can go if you-”

“No, no. I’m fine, seriously. We’re all laced up and everything. Let’s-Let’s do this.”

The ice skating establishment loaned out gloves and hats for their customers. Michael had opted out of wearing a hat but had eagerly secured a pair of gloves. Jeremy decided yes to both, pulling on a scarlet knit hat with a little puff on top that had been used before by who knows how many people; strands of his dark hair poked out underneath. At the very least, Jeremy’s bright red gloves matched the hat and it was his gloved hands that Michael grasped as they stepped onto the newly zambonied ice. It was both for Jeremy’s reassurance and his own steadiness that Michael did this, experiencing for the first time in a while the balancing act of an amateur on ice.

Before they could even really start, Michael squeezed Jeremy’s hand in comfort and urged him forward. “We’re gonna have lots of fun, okay?”

His best friend nodded twice, once with uncertainty and then a second time, more firmly. Jeremy didn’t look sick anymore, in fact his face was almost tinged red. Weird, since they hadn’t even started yet. Michael shrugged it off and tried to skate.

Keyword: Tried. But soon enough Michael realized that he hated ice skating and it didn’t take long to figure out why. He sucked at it. While Jeremy glided around him like an angel-Oh yes, it seemed the reason his mom had brought him here as a kid had been for lessons, and it turned out Jeremy hasn’t forgotten anything. So while Michael stumbled and slipped and swore (loudly at first but then more quietly once he started to draw the attention of the couple), there was Jeremy, twirling around...
him and laughing endearingly at the comedic sight.

It would’ve been annoying if Michael wasn’t so happy to see Jeremy laugh. He really was pretty good at it, not falling once and even managing to semi-skate backwards.

“You said you hadn’t been here since you were a kid. This is ridiculous. How are you so good?” Michael grumbled as Jeremy helped him up off the ice—What was this, the fifth time?

The back of his jeans were damp as was his cloth gloves from falling so many times and also attempting to catch himself as he fell.

“I remember what the lady taught us—Like you have to bend your knees, you look like a plank.”

“You look...like a plank.” Michael said, ashamed at his own comeback. “Not all of us can be perfect like you, Jeremy Heere.” At that, the boy flushed like before, except this time his cheeks were already red from skating around the rink.

“Here, I’ll help you.” Jeremy offered, using the hand he had grabbed to lift Michael off the ice to pull him forward. We’ll take it slow.”

And that’s exactly what they did. Eventually, Michael got the hang of it. Kind of. He still slipped multiple times, barely managing to catch himself and he had earned more than one dirty glare after accidentally cursing in front of the unfairly-talented kid, but all in all it wasn’t as bad.

More people started to filter into the rink before break time was called for the ice to be cleared again. Michael was looking forward to lunch but Jeremy still wanted to go on one more time and really, how could Michael deny him that when he looked so excited about it? So they temporarily satisfied themselves with snacks from the vending machine.

Once they finally did leave, with aching feet, wet clothes and chilled bodies, they finally stopped and got something substantial to eat, deciding to pass over the Italian restaurant definitely not because of what had last happened there but rather, it was a place for celebration. Also, they kind of wanted their food now.

They went to Chipotle instead and after devouring their respective burritos, the boys spent the rest of the day doing miscellaneous activities. Wandering around town, ducking behind a minivan because they thought they saw Michael’s mom when it was really just a random lady with the same hairstyle, wasting money on pastries from a bakery even though they were still full of Mexican food, and making sure to point out every dog they saw.

The day was full of conversation, smiles and most importantly, simple happiness and Michael thanked God that the exhausted him of yesterday had been too tired to pretend. Maybe he should let sleep-deprived Mell have control of the reigns more often.

Jeremy choose the dangerous decision of walking him to the door, both boys glancing around every five seconds at the sound of a car in case it was Michael’s dad early from work. The fear of being caught urged a quick goodbye but it didn’t stop him from noticing how much better things were between them now compared to a simple three days ago.

“Man, we probably won’t be able to sneak out for half a year or so...That sucks. I’ll see you tomorrow, though.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow.”
And he did see his best friend the next day, and the day after that until suddenly the it was the last
day of the work week. It had gone by so quickly that Michael had hope that he would be
ungrounded in no time at all.

One strange thing about the week though; Jake had not been present. It was actually a very curious
experience to have him constantly there, practically every day, and then he just disappears. It wasn’t
like Michael had anyway to get in contact with him either…

Michael found fears and worries he hadn’t even acknowledged relieved when he saw Jake in class
that Friday. They walked together, just like it seemed they had always done, down the hallway,
heads inclined towards each other so that they could hear what the other was saying over the loud
din of every student around them.

“Yes so, Monday school was off. Tuesday, my parents thought I had gotten lyme disease-”

“But you were all good?”

“Yeah, yeah It was just a fever,” Jake reassured him, “Wednesday, you weren’t here?”

“Oh yeah, I skipped school.”

“I did not peg you for the rebel type.” Then he thought a moment. “Actually, I can see that. I’m
waiting for the day you dye your hair like bright purple-”

Michael lightly pushed into him, “Shut up! What about yesterday?”

“Thursday, my grandmother tripped and fell down her hallway-”

“Oh my god, is she okay?”

“She’s fine, just a little bruised. But we were all worried so I got to stay home and that brings us to
today. Friday.”

“We’re all caught up then.”

Jake wordlessly agreed. Michael glanced over at him and the boy seemed like he was trying to
consider something. He didn’t comment on it for a while, instead asking Michael if he was going to
attend an apparently very important football against Middlesbrough's high school next weekend.

Michael’s memory of him being grounded momentarily lapsed and he readily agreed. After that, he
made known the other thing he was thinking of.

“I-Uh, I tried texting you all throughout the week, did something happen to your phone or-”

“Oh my Jesus, I forgot to tell you! Yes, I got grounded.”

“See? Complete rebel. What for?”

“I-I kind of completely told my parents that you and I were dating. It was an accident, it kind of just
slipped out but they uh, they grounded me and my dad took my phone so, I haven’t been able to text
or call anybody.”

“Wow. That’s good to know, though-Well, okay, not good to know. I just thought you were ignoring
me-”
The assumption actually surprised Michael so much that he stopped short, feet freezing in the hallway as Jake unknowingly walked on ahead, almost immediately being covered by the flurry of students. Michael ran after him as soon as he regained himself, catching up to him only by pushing through multiple groups of kids.

“Where did you go?”

“I fell behind, I was just—” Shocked, actually. Maybe his body had overreacted but Michael just couldn’t help but be, well amazed, at the thought. How could anyone ignore Jake Dillinger?

“I stopped, by accident. But seriously dude, I would never ignore you—Not on purpose at least.”

“Well,” Jake looked over at him and smiled widely, “That actually is good to know.”

Chapter End Notes

Sudden stop in the chapter? Ya i kinda feel that too. K so real quick notes, I'm not supposed to have any access to computes or phones as of rn so who knows when the next chapter might be up?

-i love the book Unbroken with a fiery passion and I highly recommend it

-if you think I'm not going to make the decision about who to ship hard you are wroNG AS FUCK I HOPE THE NEXT CHAPTER HURTS A LOT AND MAKES IT EVEN WORSE

OKAY LOVE YOU GUYS

if i am a car, comments are my gasoline bLESS
I Think I Need Some Silence

Chapter Notes

Happiness!

And then maybe,

Some sad.

(aka, Jake finds out just how overwhelming some things can be)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This was it. This was the most important football game Jake would ever play...Not including anything to do with the championship or tournament of course. Actually, it wouldn’t even matter that much as far as the team’s ranking and standing were concerned.

But it was still vital that Middle Borough High School take home this win, because even though it didn’t have to do with championships, rankings or standings, this game was concerned with something just as important. Pride.

Last year, East High School had absolutely murdered Middle Borough’s football team, and they hadn’t been gracious winners either. (To be fair, Middle Borough hadn’t been gracious losers either. That being said, stealing the mascot’s costume and setting it on fire had not been the way to go.)

This year was their opportunity to make things right, and by that was meant creaming East High’s team with a humiliating defeat, then promptly rubbing it in their faces—Like good sports.

The entire school was counting on this year’s team and in turn, this year’s team was counting on their star player and most successful quarterback to lead them to victory. And who else would that be but Jake Dillinger? Not only was the boy fast—kept in great shape by his rigorous practice and training session—but he was smart too. On the field you could see him working out the plays and variables in his head, undoubtedly coming to the best conclusion.

Quick in more ways than one and able to handle the pressure that all of this brought, nobody, and I do mean nobody, was expecting Jake to mess up the game.

Okay, that was harsh. No one had actually said that to him, but they didn’t need to. Jake could gauge his own success and he knew he wasn’t playing like he had in other games. No where close in fact. It was obvious and that’s why he was sitting on the bench.

It hadn’t been just one mistake either. He had misdiagnosed the coverage of the defense line, resulting in a bad play. His passes had been careless and the footwork that followed sloppy. Jake Dillinger, star player of the team, was all over the place and no one knew why.

Except for him, because of course he knew. It was due to the fact—Well multiple facts, but the first one being that for the entire week his parents had come home from their office only once. Maybe that
in itself wasn’t bad, maybe Jake was taking it out of proportion and just maybe he could have shrugged it off. But that one time they come home had been so tense, so heavy, he immediately knew something was up.

And what’s worse, Jake recognized this. He recognized the way they were getting sucked into their business once more and he knew what would become of it. Of them.

He was still getting ahead of himself. He knew that. And it wasn’t something Jake let happen often, but it was as if this time he couldn’t control it. He felt like a little kid again, with no idea how to handle what was happening.

A couple of small things made it worse. Jake suddenly found himself with no one to talk to about it. His therapist sessions had been perpetually postponed-After all he was doing so well! Michael didn’t have his phone, and he had said he was coming to the oh so very important game but Jake had searched the crowds more than once, for both his boyfriend and his parents. And then, as his frantic gaze couldn’t find them-It had to be an impairment of his vision but he couldn’t find any of his friends. No Rich, no Christine, no Brooke, Chloe, Jeremy or Jenna.

Which didn’t make sense of course, because they promised to be there for sure, but in the wild, screaming crowd all he saw was tense faces filled with all the emotions one could possibly feel doing a closely matched football game.

The sounds-pounding feet, enthusiastic cheers, loud referee whistles, hoarse yells, outraged screams-overwhelmed him.

He should have texted Rich about it, but by the time he convinced himself to actually do it, it had been time for the game; no big deal, they could always talk after. Who knew it would shake him up so much?

One word. If he could choose one word to describe the indescribable way he felt as whatever this was tried (and succeeded) to take over him: Scattered.

Jake Dillinger felt scattered.

“Okay kid, listen to me.” The assistant coach was there next to him, probably trying to figure out a way to fix him so the head coach could focus on the game. “We need you back in there.”

“I was making too many mistakes in there, coach.” Why was he trying to dissuade him? The goal was to get in the game. Maybe Jake was finally tired of the pressure and expectations. Not that he could talk to anyone about it right now...

“We’re making mistakes without you in there, anyway. We have a better chance, if you play like I know you can.”

Everyone always knows what Jake can and can’t do. Why is that always the-

“Jake, Jake.” The balding man called his name until the player was looking at him again. “I can practically see you losing yourself in your own head. That’s what’s happening, isn’t it?”

“Coach, I don’t think I can-“
“Put it aside.”

“What?”

“Forgot the previous mistakes, they don’t matter now. Take a deep breath, put it aside, and focus on the game. If anything can help, it’ll be the energy of doing right by your team. Okay?”

“Okay. Yeah, okay.”

“Coach Anderson is going to call a timeout and outline the play. You’re going in after that and you’re going to get out there and execute it. Get ready. Make us proud.”

“I’m ready. I will, I promise.”

The head coach did call a timeout, and the players all huddled around in a tight sweaty circle as he quickly went through the plan.

It relied heavily on a pass from Jake, he needed to step up to the plate.

Could he do that?

Yeah, he could.

No, no, he couldn’t. He could feel it as they called break and everyone ran onto the field, save Jake who stood where he was like an idiot.

He was going to let the team down, again, and in turn the entire student body would be disappointed with him and then-

“JAKE!” Was he hallucinating sounds now? Because that sure sounded a lot like- “GO JAKE GO!” He whipped his head around to their side of their bleachers which Michael Mell stood in, frantically waving a sign that proclaimed in capital letters, “EAST HIGH SUCKS-.” and then a crudely drawn picture of a donkey. Jake laughed out loud looking at it and even above the cheering, it was like Michael heard him.

Not just Michael was supporting him however. The whole gang had showed up-Rich with his face painted their school colors, Brooke and Christine with their own signs, Chloe fashionably sporting the colors too with Jeremy and Jenna cheering right along next to them-and how had Jake not seen them before? Had he not really been looking?

That being said, more and more eyes were being turned towards Jake as he became the only player not on the field. His coach was spastically signalling for him to get his ass out there and what the hell was he doing? He ordered his legs to move now, but not in the right direction.

The sounds of the stadium were dying down now and maybe someone else would have lost their nerve, but Jake Dillinger wasn’t like that, was he? So instead of straight ahead to the field, he jogged over to the bleachers where his supportive boyfriend stood, confused as to what was happening.

Using those strong, toned arms that football had formed for him, Jake placed his hands on the bleacher wall, hoisting himself up so that he could kiss a very red-faced Michael. Which is exactly what he did.
Suddenly the crowd was erupting, everyone in the stands roaring with approval. The noise wasn’t pushing Jake down now; he let the energy course through him, savored the blushing grin and sweet lips of Michael Mell.

Back together in one piece, Jake ran onto the field and the game resumed.

He was breathless, sweaty; every single muscle seemed to be aching, including his face. Despite that Jake still couldn’t stop smiling. He definitely wasn’t going to take all the credit; it was like the entire team had found their rhythm and refused to give up on it until the game was over. They had won by a very close seven points.

The entire crowd—Or more accurately, Middlesbrough’s students in the crowd were screaming bloody murder while East High’s team were shooting the winners looks of bloody murder.

Coach’s victory speech after the game, the endless clapping on backs and whooping that the team engaged, and the showers that followed all passed in one joyous blur, until Jake was walking out of the stadium to meet up with his friends who had graciously waited. They were all almost as happy as he was, especially one proud boy…

“Jake, that was amazing! I mean I know I called you Mr. Muscle man as a joke but damn. You should have seen the cheerleaders on the other team, they looked like they were dying—” Jake just grinned as Michael prattled on about how wonderful he had played in the game, with the passing and the running—He obviously didn’t know that much about football, but Jake appreciated the effort.

“Why don’t we go out and celebrate the win, huh?” Jake asked, really feeling like himself again.
“There’s this really good diner-type place over on Evergreen.” Michael’s eyes lit up at the idea for a whole second, and then the color was draining out of his face with alarming speed.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Jake worriedly asked.

Michael’s walking towards the parking lot sped up. “I completely forgot about it when you guys won, but I kind of… Snuck out of the house?” He phrased it like a question, as if it were an uncertainty.

“Really?”

“Yeah, well,” The words came out in a rush. “My dad was being a huge dick—He was like, ‘Your grounding is still in effect.’ And I was like ‘The two weeks are up!’ And he said they weren’t so I—I like crawled out of the basement window into the garden.”

Jake stifled a laugh, imagining just exactly how that would have looked. “And they didn’t catch you?”

Michael tentatively pulled out his phone as if he were afraid to look at it, breathing out a sigh of relief when no missed calls or texts popped up.

“I’m pretty sure they have no idea. But I need to get home now.” His expression fell. “Sorry, Jake, I really do want to celebrate with you—”
“Dude, don’t even worry about it. It’s no big deal.” And it truly wasn’t. In fact, Jake was already forming a plan—A devious charming plan. Because surely, no parent would be able to resist the endearing manner of a dedicated Jake Dillinger. Or at the very least, no parent had yet to resist.

Jake was hoping to keep that streak alive. Best case scenario, they allow their son to be taken out to dinner. What’s the worst thing that could happen? He had had enough of considering the worse for today.

Instead, he waved goodbye to Michael who was going to be driven him by Christine (Known in the group to have a lead foot on the gas pedal. Perfect choice for this situation), as if he wasn’t planning on seeing him in twenty minutes or so.

He headed home just as quickly, making a short mental list of everything he had to grab.

Wallet, jacket, phone charger. In and out.

Briefly he wondered if his parents would be home, but even if they were, it hardly mattered. There shouldn’t be any reason for him not to go.

That was along the lines of his thinking. Unfortunately he was very wrong.

The smile still hadn’t faded yet. He opened the door with it still displayed on his face. He felt it drop off as he witnessed the sight. The sight of his parents, looking harried and...scattered. Piles of clothes were littered on the couches; two matching suitcases were on the coffee table, already packed with tightly folded clothing.

They looked up in shock as the door opened, as if they were expecting something—Or someone else.

“Oh Jake, it’s just you. Thank God.”

“Thank God? Who else would it be? What the-What’s happening?”

His parents didn’t answer immediately. They first shared a glance filled with hidden knowledge as if Jake wasn’t even in the room; it infuriated him. His dad approached with arms casually up, in a “I’m innocent” gesture. While he explained, Jake’s mom continued packing.

“Jake, I’m not going to lie. This is going to be hard. You won’t be satisfied with all the answers. But we have to leave.”

“Why the f—” Out of habit, Jake made an effort not to curse in front of his parents. “Why would we have to leave? For how long? What—What is happening?”

“I’m trying to explain, Jake.” His dad took a deep breath, maybe to prepare himself for what he had to say next. “There was-Is, There is a problem with the company and—Well I think you’re old enough to know... We’re in trouble.”

Jake’s mind was struggling not to implode with what was being forced on him. “Trouble? Mom?” She didn’t look at him, continuing to fold a pair of jeans. “What type of trouble?”

“Money trouble. Bad money trouble.” He gave the words only seconds to sink in. “I promise you that we will explain on the way, but time is running out. We need to go, you should start packing.”
“Dad, what? Go? Go where?”

His mom finally looked at him. “Away, away from here. In the car, we’ll tell you then, Jakie.”

They murmured his nickname, Jakie, as if it changed everything. As if his entire world wasn’t crumbling before him.

She zipped up a suitcase with finality and that was when it hit. They were serious.

“M-Mom, dad, I can’t. What about school? It’s the middle of the year!”

“Honey, you’re going to have to transfer.” His mom commented as if it were obvious.

“But-But-” Now the stutter was trying to take hold but he barely noticed. “All my friends are here, Rich and-and Michael-I can’t leave Michael!”

Another look passed between them and Jake fought the urge to scream. “Baby, I’m sorry. But we have to go. Now. Go upstairs and get your bag-”

“Mom, dad, please -” His voice cracked. “I don’t understand-”

“You won’t until we have enough time to explain. Now go get your suitcase, we need to hurry up.

“No .”

His parents stared at him. “What?”

“This isn’t a game, Jake.” His dad almost snapped. He looked exhausted.

“You said we have to leave. I said no. You have to leave.”

“Jakie, what are you even talking about?”

“Don’t-Don’t call me that, mom. You heard me. If you want to-Need to, leave. Then fine, whatever.” His voice sounded far too stable for what he was saying. “But I’m not going to go. I’m staying here.”

Two hours later, the house was empty. And it felt familiar. The regular silence that had always filled it before everything changed. The regular silence that Jake could never fill. It hadn’t stopped him from trying. Because when his house was filled with music booming loud enough to cause hearing problems and hundreds of stomping bodies and meaningless conversations, he felt the silence a little less.

Now he wish nothing had changed. He yearned, not for the days when his parents were here, but back when it started and it was all he knew. Because when you have a taste of just how good it can get, it hurts so much more when it gets taken away.

Jake could have sat on that couch for seconds. Or it could have been for minutes. Or hours. Months, years, centuries.
But time did pass and then suddenly he was on his feet and walking towards the door. He needed to be with someone because Jake Dillinger, had never been good at handling the silence.

At least outside there were the noise of crickets and cicadas, creating a lovely hum to try but fail to concentrate on.

He didn’t trust himself behind the wheel, so he forsook driving, instead taking a walk to nowhere where he definitely didn’t think of the tears his mother had on her face as she kissed him goodbye and promised they’d be back and *please* wouldn’t he go with him?

No. No he would not.

The nowhere ended up being a place. The nowhere ended up being Michael Mell’s place; this is where he had been wanting to go anyway, wasn’t it?

So then why did he stand outside the front door, about to ring the doorbell and then thinking, no, he shouldn’t.

About to-No, he shouldn’t.

About to-No. No.

Yes. He rang the doorbell and Michael answered it.

And Michael’s face immediately took on one of worry and concern when he saw the tears streaming down Jake’s face that hadn’t wanted to appear in front of his parents.

And before he could even say anything, Michael hugged him and it was like all there was left in the world was Michael.

“Who’s at the door?” A voice, Jake assumed to be Michael’s father, yelled from an passageway leading somewhere into the house. He had probably interrupted the Mell’s dinner, and that seemed to he confirmed when Michael reluctantly let go and told him, “Hold on, one sec, I promise.”

Today had been filled with too many promises and if Jake heard another so-called promise again it would be too soon.

*That’s the problem.* He thought absently, because it was the only thought he was allowing. The problem with what? His life? The world? Didn’t matter. *People don’t really know how much promises mean. So they break them easily.*

He heard his name being called out by Michael from the front door. Somehow Jake was now sitting on the curb, likely looking like someone who had been thrown out of their house, instead of like a person who now had an entire place to himself. The thought made him laugh. Or was he still crying?

Once Michael spotted Jake, he made his way there, sitting down right next to him on the dirty curb.

“Is everything okay with your parents?” Is the question Jake asked, if only to fill the air.
Michael saw right through it. “Yeah, everything’s fine but with all due respect, that is not what we’re going to be talking about.” Tentatively he reached out and touched Jake’s arm. “What happened, man?”

So he was told, in an almost emotionless voice—or as emotionless as he could manage.

Jake could feel how shocked Michael was and he waited for a response.

“That’s—Oh my god, Jake.”

Yeah, that pretty much summed it up.

“Jesus,” He continued, “I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.”

“Well it’s not your fault either, you know that, right?”

When he didn’t answer, Michael got face-to-face to him, compelling him to look into his eyes.

“Right?”

Jake looked away and in a tight voice whispered, “I should have known this was going to happen, Michael. That’s on me for—allowing—”

He was stopped mid-sentence. “None of this is on you. Absolutely nothing. Don’t blame yourself for being a kid trusting their parents—Shit, this is really fucked up. But it’s never is and never will be your fault. Okay?”

Michael was met with a tear-filled gaze. “But this is it, Michael, this is what happens. People leave, my parents left, and no—amount of watching Ferris Bueller is going to change that—”

“They didn’t leave because of you, they left because of their own mistakes, but they’ll be back—”

“What if I don’t want them back?”

“That’s—It’s not something you have to deal with right now, Jake. You’re going to fall apart if you think about all of it once—”

“I am falling apart.”

“But you’re going to hold it together.” Michael hugged him once more, fiercely. “Because you’re Jake freaking Dillinger, right? And your friends are here. They won’t be leaving.”

Jake was still looking at Michael, but distantly. It came into focus as he reminded him, “And me, Jake. You have me too, don’t forget that.”

He didn’t smile; it was much too soon for smiling. But something in his eyes lightened and for now that was enough.

They sat together for a while without speaking because there was nothing that needed to be said. At the end of the day however, one of the two boys still had parents present and ready to enforce curfew.
“I-I can ask them if I can sleep over your place if you don’t want-If you don’t want to go back.” Michael offered as his mom called him inside. “Or you can totally crash here for the night, I can convince my parents-”

Jake shook his head quickly, effectively cutting Michael off. They both knew what Michael’s parents-Or at the very least, what his dad would say, and even with everything Jake was going through, he didn’t think it was worth Michael to go through all that.

“Are you sure, dude? Because it’s no big deal,” He said, obviously feigning casualness. There was something else in his tone too though, protectiveness for the hurt boy maybe, and empathy.

Jake appreciated it.

“And you shouldn’t—After what happened—” Michael struggled to find the right words, “You shouldn’t have to go back to a...big, empty house.”

For the third time that night, the two boys embraced, now in a goodbye gesture. They held on to each other longer than ever before; the two needed it.

“It’s okay,” Jake reassured him as they finally let go. His voice was still that almost emotionless, very close to the breaking edge. “I’ll be fine. I think that I—” He took a quiet breath. “I think I need some silence.”

Chapter End Notes

"They laundered money, now they’re on the run. Which means the house is empty, so that's...fun."

Did you know that I am 99% validation? Bless me with your comments.
Because Everyone Deserves A Chance

Chapter Notes

"What?!?" You gape in astonishment. "Another chapter so soon?"
Yes indeed my good fellows, yes indeed. Trash can be churned out at an alarming rate when one is truly dedicated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Michael was in trouble. Kind of. Well technically speaking, he had been every since he was grounded. But after that, when Jake had shown up at the door in tears, he had snapped at his dad.
In the moment, it had seemed reasonable.
He had asked who was at the door-And man, his face when Michael revealed it to be Jake. It wasn’t really a surprise that his dad demanded to know what he was here for, ("I-uh, don’t know?") and then decreed that since Michael was still grounded, that meant no hanging out sessions.
Well Michael wouldn’t exactly qualify this as a “hanging out session”. And he told his dad as such, but he had just squinted his eyes as if Michael was lying.
He didn’t have time for this. “Look, something happened to Jake, I have no idea what but I’m going to go out and see what’s wrong. You can stay at the table, eating dinner and thinking about how much you hate your son.” His mom audibly gasped and his dad just stared.
Michael didn’t wait for a response.

A week had passed since then and things had been...Icy, to say the least. Icy and awkward. His mom struggled to be the mediator, starting conversations that spluttered out almost immediately and exchanging frantic glances with both of them.
Michael didn’t regret what he said exactly, it felt nice to just throw that out in the open. But after hearing about Jake and his parents, it almost felt selfish to have a relationship like this one with his dad.
That didn’t mean he was going to apologize anytime soon. At the very least, his grounding had ended, and their ignoring each other caused no room for an extension.
Which is why that week, Michael was hanging out with Jeremy and to his endless chagrin, things were once again tense. This time was different however, because Michael had a feeling Jeremy was actually going to tell him why.

It was so tiring having to constantly be on his toes with his best friend-It’s not even supposed to be like that with your best friend. One of the reasons he had been so happy the last time they hung out was because Michael assumed they were finally over...whatever it had been. But here they were, sitting on two beanbags and silently playing video games. They never played video games silently—How could they even without the snarky comments, frustrated groans, or irritated yells?
Right now they were managing to find a way. The game that they always focused on didn’t have it’s usual magic; Every minute or so, Michael would send a furtive glance Jeremy’s way.

Pale, clammy, even a little red as if he were holding something in that would make him explode. The boy looked ill, honestly, and Michael was worried. In fact, it had seemed for the past seven days that was all he had done. Worry.

First it had been for Jake, who was taking time to recover from the parental incident. He had kindly explained that what he really needed right now was time to come to terms with it. Michael was more than a little concerned, imagining Jake all alone in his family’s home with nothing but memories. Still, he had respected his wishes and given him some space. It was the least he could do, considering no one other than Rich knew, which meant that everyone was acting towards Jake as they always had.

To be fair, that was how Jake had explicitly wanted it. If it had gotten out, the entire school would have been swarmed with whispers and looks all directed towards one student. Even more than usual. So Rich and Michael had together been sworn to secrecy, and asked to give space.

Space was a good thing. It showed Michael just how much time he had been spending with Jake. It also revealed Michael’s feelings towards the boy which was not something he had been prepared to handle. He was surprised at how... strong they were. Suddenly it was all displayed in front of him like a complicated chart and Michael would be honest, it scared him how much he cared for Jake.

It scared him a lot. Too much. It impacted his decisions, his words, that day. It shaped them, and not in a positive way-Not in the way he wanted it to.

Maybe space wasn’t so great after all.

Jeremy dropped the controller with a defeated sigh as his on-screen character was ripped apart by a horde of zombies. They sat together in silence, both concentrated on Michael’s avatar, who without his partner, quickly died too.

Michael dropped the controller and turned to Jeremy, only to find the boy unabashedly looking at him.

“Is something wrong, dude? You look sick.”

“I feel sick.” Jeremy muttered, suddenly jumping up from his seat like he couldn’t sit still for another second.

The other boy, still-seated, watched in confusion as Jeremy began pacing the room.

Without looking at him, he began talking. “I-There’s something that I want-That I need to tell you. Have been n-needng to tell you.”

Michael nodded, having guessed as much. “Okay, go ahead.” Now what the question was, he didn’t have a single idea.

Okay well, he had a few.
“It’s not that easy, Michael! If it was I would have already told you.” The pacing increased.

“Is it something important?”

Jeremy laughed without humor. “Uh, yeah. At least I think so. You might not. You could laugh it off or-I don’t know, start screaming.”

“Screaming? Is it really that bad, Jer?”

Suddenly the moving stopped and Jeremy was looking at Michael with a familiar expression. A look he had seen every time he happened to glance at a mirror.

“Yes. It’s that bad.”

Quickly, Michael got up from his bean-bag too and jogged the few steps over to Jeremy who looked on the verge of a breakdown. He put both hands on his shoulder, hoping to ground him.

“Jeremy?”

“Yes?”

“Take a deep breath, stay calm, and tell me.”

“Okay.” Jeremy skipped the breath. And the staying calm. “I-I-You-and-What I’m trying to say- Jesus Christ, this is hard.”

“Jeremy, what is it?”

“Rich is in love with Jake.”

Michael did laugh. Once. And it ended upon exiting his mouth. It was a laugh of disbelief, the only reaction his brain could produce while it struggled to try and understand.

“I’m sorry, what?” Not that Michael had anything to apologize for. It was simply the only thing that came out at the moment.

Jeremy swallowed thickly before repeating, more slowly this time as if emphasizing, “Rich is in love with Jake.”

“How-How do you know?” And why is that what Michael asked?

He didn’t care how he knew; all he could think about, strangely, is two things. The way Jake always looked at him, and how frightened the feeling in his heart, as response to that look, made him feel.

“It’s-I just know. I mean, he has been for a long time. Before you guys starting dating.”

Why did this tale sound so familiar? It was as if Michael was hearing someone narrate his own life story.

Unwillingly, Michael started thinking of Rich and Jake together, as boyfriends. Real boyfriends, not fake ones. Rich going camping with the Dillinger’s and Jake kissing Rich in front of a rapturous, cheering crowd.
It hurt to ponder on those images. He felt it, a pang in his heart and a sharp twist in his stomach and now Michael was the one feeling sick.

He moved his hand protectively over his stomach, as if that would protect it from anymore blows. His eyes felt moist, like they were just waiting for the command or-or the tipping point.

*Say the word and we’ll start spilling!*

“*Why?*” His voice was tight with feeling, it was like there was something in his throat trying to block the words from being forced out. “*Why are you telling me this?*”

One look at Jeremy and it seemed apparent that his eyes were waiting for the command too. Not just that, but the look in them also began to appear frantic. Like a wild animal being cornered.

“Because, Michael” Now his tone sounded anxious to explain. “Because I think-I think that-I’m telling you this because I think that everyone deserves a chance to try and tell their crush that they like him.”

Now *there* was a real reason to laugh. Such bitter irony wouldn’t have fit better if it was writing planned out by an author.

Jeremy was still talking in a rush to get everything out. He sounded sad, tormented, as he muttered, “Well that’s not true, some people don’t deserve the chance-” And in-between the panic and the fear, the worry and the hurt, it clicked for Michael and he understood.

“Oh my god, Jeremy. ” It stopped the other boy, mid-sentence. “I get it. I get why you told me.”

Maybe the curse of words being pushed out uncontrollably that had seized Jeremy was passed on to Michael, because now he was the one spouting off.

“It’s because you like Jake!”

“I like Jake?” It wasn’t a statement, rather the question from a very bewildered teenager, but Michael took it as confirmation.

“God, *that’s* been way you’ve been acting so weird. You were in love with Jake and I started dating him.”

“I-I said that *Rich* was in love with Jake-”

“And you’re Rich, you just didn’t want to tell me upfront. I get it, Jeremy.”

“Michael, n-”

But it was too late. Michael had already made up his mind about what he had to do. He didn’t have to face the fear of loving someone-loving Jake Dillinger of all people. Not if his best friend was dating him. And apparently, Jeremy had been in love with Jake first, for a long time-Michael had just gotten in the way of that.

Wasn’t it time for Michael to pick up once more the role he was best suited for? The third-wheeling best friend, quirky and maybe even cute, perfect for a laugh. But not really important.
“Of course you deserve to be with your crush, Jeremy. To be with Jake.” He took a deep breath. “I think it’s time you knew.”

“No, Michael-Wait, knew what?”

“Jake and I aren’t actually dating. It was just a prank. It’s fake.”


A lie.

And yet the other part of Michael, the part that knew just how much he cared for Jake and certainly wasn’t scared of it, couldn’t even believe what he was doing. Could barely stomach the words coming out of his mouth. They were the true lies. Because if that part of Michael had to choose only one word to describe everything they had gone through, it sure as hell wouldn’t be “Fake”.

But it was too late, the fear had won. He couldn't take back what was already spoken into the heavy air, and even if he could, Michael probably wasn’t strong enough to do it.

Jeremy stared, gaping at him, and for just a split second, Michael thought of what talent Jeremy had, managing to capture shock, betrayal, anger, sorrow and just the tiniest bit of hope all in one soap opera of a look.

And then the thought was gone and he was trying to form words. “What the fuck. Michael, what did you just say?”

Numbness took the place of fear as Michael tries to get the secret out once more-And it was not a good replacement.

“I-I said that Jake and I aren’t actually dating. We told his parents we were at art night-Or I went along with it because it looked like he needed help and then later we agreed that it would be a pretty funny prank if we convinced you guys we were dating and I didn’t see any harm in it-” He paused a moment for breath. “And we never really agreed when we would end it, I guess time got away from us. Things happened-”

Things like private kisses and camping trips, nightmares, hushed comfort and paintings. Basketball, football, and really bad parenting; his own mind was throwing these at him. How could each of these special moments be degraded to a such a non-committal word as “Things”? Michael continued despite the mental interference. “-I meant to tell you, I really did and I almost did too, multiple times, but Jake and I-we never talked about it-”

The explanation was convoluted, almost incomprehensible, but certain things just got across. “‘Time got away from us?’ ” Jeremy was outraged. “What the fuck, Michael, it’s been months. That isn’t a prank, it’s some sick joke and-and why didn’t you tell me before?”

“It wasn’t a sick joke, Jeremy, it was a mistake.” It was some of the best days of his life. “And I’m telling you now, that’s what matters.”

“That matters shit! You’re only telling me because you think I’m in love with Jake.”

Michael forehead wrinkled, his eyebrows furrowed. “Aren’t-Aren’t you in love with Jake?”
Jeremy almost screamed, “No! Why the fuck would I be in love with Jake? I’m in-I told you, Rich was the one in love with Jake.

He shook his head in denial, as if none of what Jeremy had just said made sense.

“Then why would you tell me?” Michael asked quietly.

Jeremy couldn’t hear him on account of the fact that he was on the move again, walking around the room and ranting loudly with a curse thrown in every other word. “You’re fucking fake dating Jake and I’m told now, about a thousand goddamn years later-”

“But why?” Michael repeated, almost to himself, “Why would you tell me Rich was in love with Jake if you didn’t have a crush on him and you thought we were actually dating? It doesn’t-It doesn’t make any sense.”

“So much for best friends, right? So much for telling each other everything! All that shit is out the window-”

“Jeremy!” Michael’s voice became raised, powerfully demanding attention. He received it; Jeremy stopped in his tracks and looked at Michael in surprise.

“Why would you tell me this? Give me the real reason.” But both his look and his voice was cold, because Michael believed he already knew.

“Because-” And now Jeremy is yelling at him, not even sure which pair of boys he’s referring to, “You don’t know what it’s like to be in love with your best friend and- Goddammit, everyone deserves at least the chance to have that!”

If it was cold before, it didn't compare to how the room felt now. The atmosphere around them had to be below zero. Tension, heaviness in the air-None of it could describe what was going on between the two.

As daggers began to be thrown by gaze alone, Michael remarked in a weighted voice, “I never did.”

That wasn’t what Jeremy had been expecting. “Uh-Uh, what?”

As Michael repeated himself, his words themselves become the weapon. “I said, I never had that chance. So don’t you goddamn tell me that I don’t know what it’s like because-” A laughing noise escaped him, “I should be the fucking poster child.”.

“Waitwaitwait, what?”

“You know what, Jeremy? I can’t deal with you- With this right now-” Conveniently familiar words were floating towards him and Michael took the opportunity to grasp them. “I need some space.”

As fast as was possible, he gathered his stuff and was speed-walking out of the house, desperate for fresh air. Jeremy did nothing to stop him, continuing to stand in that one spot as if he had broken down.

His first thought, upon leaving, was to talk to somebody- And who else did he have close enough to do that other than Jeremy? Jake of course, but Jake needed space just like Michael was yearning for it now.
When had that—or more accurately, they become the main parts of his life? Those goddamned boys had managed to take over his mind and his heart, and Michael wanted out.

Of course he couldn’t have that.

So instead he settled for one afternoon completely alone.

Michael walked through his neighborhood, focusing only on the sounds of cheerful birds chirping and fulfilled insects humming; the sights of happy people mulling around. And he thought of nothing. He thought of everything.

Two days later and it seemed Jake has had enough space, because Michael saw some of the normal-him back. They were sitting at the lunch table and Jake was telling Rich and him a story about...something. To be honest, Michael hadn’t been paying attention to that. He was staring first at Jake, and then Rich.

When Jake would smile brilliantly at Rich, Michael noticed how the short boy’s eyes lit up. Or when Jake heartily laughed at one of his jokes, Rich’s freckled face would scrunch up in happiness.

Though he hadn’t experienced it in quite a while, Michael still recognized the feeling.

He felt his heart sinking, sinking, sinking.

But he wasn’t the only one who was noticing things. Every other minute or so, Jake would glance at the distraught and distracted expression on Michael’s face, until in a whisper, Jake asked him, “Is something wrong? It looks like something’s wrong.”

So many things were wrong. But Jake didn’t need to know that. There was only one thing he needed to know.

Michael just needed to be selfless enough to tell him.

Halfway through lunch, he grabbed Jake’s hand, hauling him up to go and talk to him in private. Maybe if it had happened on the days previous, Michael would have blushed at Rich’s suggestive wolf whistle. But as Jake grinned in response, all Michael could think was that, if what Jeremy said were true, Rich could really be hurting.

He hid it well. Just as well as Michael, in fact.

“Where are you taking me?” Jake asked as he was led into the empty hallway. Michael could hear the smile in his voice, and he winced. Here was a boy who was happy just to be with him, and Michael was throwing that—and his own joy-away.

The disbelievers in the beginning of all this had been right after all.

Michael Mell wasn’t good enough for Jake Dillinger.

When they had reached a random spot in the school, and Michael double checked twice to make sure no one else was there, he took a deep breath.
“Jake, I-Uh, we need to talk.”

Jake’s face immediately darkened because who doesn’t know what those words mean.

“About what?” Michael was asked hesitantly.

“I’m just going to come out and say it okay? I think-I think that Rich likes you. A lot.” Michael watched as Jake’s face lightened up a bit, as if asking, is that all this is?

“Of course Rich likes me, he’s my best frie-”

“No, I mean-” Michael internally groaned, fully aware he was about to sound like a third grader. “I mean, he like-likes you.”

After that clarification, Jake looked confused. “Rich? Our Rich?” As if there were another Rich Michael could possibly be referring to. “Richard Goranski does not like me-At least, not in the way you’re thinking.” And then with a worried look, Jake can’t help but wonder, “Why are you telling me this though? I mean like, we are dating.”

He said it with a laugh, but both boys could feel the missing word in the air. Fake dating.

“First, trust me when I say that I’m almost completely positive he does and, well, the reason why I’m telling you is because...” Being selfless had never hurt this much. Michael was trying hard to ignore the pressing insistence that was warning him he was ruining a very good thing.

But he had to. Because-

“Everyone deserves a chance.”

Chapter End Notes

Did this chapter happen to cause emotion? I sure hope so because that was the intended result.
Adored it??
Despised it??
Please, let me know in the comments! Theories, analyses, + long comments absolutely make my day-Though to be fair, so does every comment. (But if you hated it please bee gentle for i am but a fragile spirit)
Final thing, stay tuned because things are probably going to get worse
And they don’t come back.

Chapter Notes

Hi Y’all! I’m actually a little nervous about posting this because I’m not sure how y’all will take it, but this should just be continuing the angst and confusion that embodies these four poor boys.

I did want to make just a very quick note; I’ve gotten a lot of comments imploring these oblivious boys to just sit down and talk with each other like adults and while that would be extremely satisfying, what I’m trying to get across is that are not adults, but simply hormonal teenage boys who have never had to experience anything like this before, they don’t know how to control their emotions, and they don’t know the best or healthiest way to deal with these things happening. In this way, I want to make it as realistic as possible because I know just how emotional a teenager can get (that’s a subtweet at myself)

As always, thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy this chapter~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To say that Jake was troubled by what Michael told him would be...overstating things. Because really, truly, he wasn’t that stressed. If there was one thing Jake knew, it was his best friend, and the idea that Richard Goranski had a crush on him was so foreign, it was almost hard to think about.

That being said, wondering about the reason why Michael would tell him such a thing was a little more distressing. Could it be some some strange tactic for breaking up with him? It didn’t really make sense, but Jake was finding that to be a common theme in things to do with Michael.

Whatever the case, he’d talk to Michael about it after dealing with this whole “His-Best-Friend-Might-Have-A-Crush-On-Him.”

Jake had promised that he’d do it soon too, so that was why the following day after school he stood on Rich’s doorstep ringing the bell.

Despite hanging out just days ago, Jake hadn’t actually been inside Rich’s house very recently. He always told Jake the reason for that was his dad; on any given day he was either passed out on the couch or out finding day-jobs.

In the earliest days of their friendship, it was a fact Rich hadn’t tried to hide; he would march brazenly up to his room past his slumbering dad. After the Squip had been rid of however, Rich had confided in Jake that that had been a calculated maneuver. It was supposed to come across as edgy or dangerous; a total bad boy move.

Jake noted the difference now as he was led through the living and dining rooms to the stairs, after Rich had hesitantly opened the door, smiling wide when he saw who it was.

He picked up some of the beer cans on the coffee table they passed, throwing them in the recycle while sending an apologetic glance his way. Jake did what he could to show Rich that he didn’t care and he certainly wasn’t judging him.

When they reached his room, the dark blue walls, messy bad and tangled mess of controllers and
consoles was a familiar and welcoming sight. Rich immediately plopped down on the bed, but since he hadn’t been up here in a while, Jake looked around the room.

He smiled at the grinning picture of him and Rich, freshman year of high school sitting on the dresser, only noticing until after a piece of canvas sticking out from behind the furniture.

“Woah, what’s this?”

Rich shifted so he could see what Jake was talking about. His tone was nonchalant, “Oh, that’s a painting I made for the art gallery.”

Jake was shocked. Two of his friends could paint?

He looked at Rich who was laughing at his expression, “No, I don’t paint. Mrs. Lear just wanted everyone in art class to make something for it and I was like, ‘Eh, why not.’”

Jake remembered the art teacher encouraging all her students to make a painting for the gallery; he felt a slight flicker of guilt when he realized he immediately dismissed her plea. It wasn’t something he could focus on for long however upon realizing one of the paintings he had really admired—Arguably the painting that started everything because it had prompted his dad to ask that ill-fated question, had been created by his best friend. Months later, the painting still looked exactly the same; two shadowed male silhouettes embracing with a proudly distinct rainbow background. Jake felt the same warmth flow through him that he had experienced the first time.

“I actually saw this last year! I really liked it, I had no idea it was you.”

“Richard Goranski is a man of many mysteries.”

“Are the people in the painting anyone specific?”

“Nah, it’s just some shadows.”

Carefully Jake put the painting back in its place and completed his check out of the room. The only thing that worried him was the growing stack of empty red mountain dew bottles thrown in the trash can.

“You’re going to have a heart attack if you keep drinking so much of those.”

Rich grinned sheepishly, “Yeah, I know. Drinking mountain dew in general tastes like a heart attack, but I can’t help it. Plus it pairs well with call of duty.” He motioned towards the controllers as if to say, Are we gonna play or what? But that wasn’t what Jake had come for today.

He flopped down right next to Rich and mentally prepared himself for what had to come next.

“Okay so, I have a question I want to ask you.”

Usually they didn’t make such a show of asking a question, so a perplexed but intrigued Rich quickly indicated for Jake to go on.

Stalling would get them nowhere; he jumped right into it.

“Do you have a crush on me?”
Jake watched the reaction very carefully, not sure whether he should be expecting sputtering, a red face, nervous excuses-Or maybe a paler reaction; face going white, eyes silently widening. A confession? A denial?

He received none of those things. Rich looked very steady as he answered the question with a question.

“Are you in love with Michael?”

“What?” To his credit, Jake didn’t splutter either. Both boys were locked in a competition of seemingly no blatant response. “Answer the question I asked you!”

“No. Tell me first how you feel about Michael?”

“Why in the world-I asked you first.” Jake had a feeling he was losing the competition. “Answer my question and then, maybe, maybe I’ll answer yours.” But it was all over his face; Jake could see Rich studying his entire being, especially his reaction when Michael’s name was mentioned. He got the distinct impression of being read as openly as a book, and for one full minute it was simply is the two of them staring at, staring into each other.

And then the moment was gone, and Rich was laughing, hard. Jake continued to sit on the bed confused as the boy next to him struggled to compose himself.

“No, man, I don’t have a crush on you. That full of yourself, huh?”

Jake pushed Rich, but soon enough was joining him in his laughter. “Just so you know, I knew it wasn’t true,” He defended himself, “I would totally be able to tell, I’m very good at reading people.”

Rich mockingly nodded, “Yes, yes, I’m sure.” He jumped up to avoid another of Jake’s shoves.

“Seriously though,” Jake continued as their laughter died down, “I don’t know what Michael was talking about.”

Next to him Rich froze and stared. “Michael told you that? That’s...crazy, man. Why would he say that?” He pondered for a moment. “Is everything okay with you two?”

That was certainly a launch pad into the complicated mess that was Jake’s feelings and he was glad he had a best friend to rant to. “I don’t know man, everything is so confusing and it’s even more tricky because…” He paused.

“What is it?”

Jake had told Michael that he was going to tell Rich about it, after it had been revealed that now Jeremy knew. (That certainly explained the distance he had gotten from Heere during school.)

It seemed to be a good a time as ever…

“I’m going to tell you something but you can’t freak out. Okay?”

“No promises,” Rich promised, “But okay, go ahead.”

Jake told him.

“Oh. Wow.”
“Yeah.”

“Wow.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

Rich paused a moment before answering. “That’s...okay, man. I mean, I’m super surprised-You guys really pulled it off.” Silence for just the quickest second before he remarked, “Brooke and Chloe are going to be so disappointed.”

Once again they were laughing, but this time for Jake it was paired with gratitude at the way Rich reacted. When they were finally able to control themselves, Rich asked a question that threw Jake rather off-guard.

“So, you said you’re fake dating, but are you really?”

Jake stared at him. Hadn’t they just gone over this? “Uh, yeah. I just told you-”

“No, man, I mean, do you actually like him in that way.”

He didn’t respond with words, but unable to help himself, Jake smiled, happy and wide and revealing the obvious answer.

In a quiet voice and just the smallest of laughs, Rich commented, “I knew it. You’re head over heels for him. Where is he now? Go get your mans.”

Jake chuckled but the reminder brought him back down from the cloud he was on. “Oh, I believe he’s trying to work things out with Jeremy. I think their friendship might be in trouble, actually.”

Rich settled down more comfortably on the bed before responding. “They’ve been friends since forever. I think they’ll be fine. And hey, maybe it’s just a little awkward between them because of the crush.”

Jake looked at him out of the corner of his eye, “What crush?”

“You know, Michael used to have a crush on Jeremy-Or at least I think he did. It was pretty obvious, Jake.”

Obvious to who? Everyone but Jake?

“Did you really not notice?”

He really hadn’t but in that seconds, everything was becoming a lot more clear.

Did you really not notice?

Did

Michael kissing Jake in front of Jeremy and immediately looking Jeremy’s way

You
Michael grabbing his hand as soon as he saw Jeremy in the hallway

Really

Jeremy’s glaring at the grocery store.

Not

The constant tension between the two.

Notice?

Jake choked back a strange noise that was trying to force its way out and implored his own mind to act rationally. “Did-Did Jeremy ever find out about the crush?”

He could tell from the sidelong glance that Rich noticed something off in his tone but that was the least of his concerns.

“I joked about it with him like a week ago because I thought he knew, but I guess he didn’t. That’s why I said it might be awkward between them.”

“How-how long has he-Michael, had this crush?”

“I don’t know, a while-why are you asking?” Rich jumped in front of him, forcing Jake to look at his face. “Dude, don’t overthink it. I’m sure it’s nothing-Maybe their friendship really is in trouble.”

Jake wanted to laugh at Rich’s poor attempt at comfort but he remained distracted. “I don’t think that’s the better of the two options.” He pointed out.

Rich groaned, “My point is, trust in Michael okay? You both like each other a lot, that’s another thing that’s pretty obvious.”

And it was good advice, trusting Michael and Jake wanted to take it. But Jake, he had so little trust left, and as he walked out of Rich’s house, all he could think was this sudden new revelation consuming his constant thoughts.

Was Michael using their relationship to make Jeremy jealous?

Michael didn’t answer the question at first. They were standing in Jake’s big empty house, right in front of a large picture window. Jake had called Michael over after taking some time to compose his thoughts. Michael, having failed at trying to reach Jeremy, agreed to meet up. And when Jake had bluntly come out and asked Michael about it, the boy had simply froze. Which was as much an answer as Jake needed.

He should probably be angry, right? Did he even have that right?

Michael seemed to be thinking along the same lines.
“It wasn’t like a conscious choice, Jake-I mean, well it was but I wasn’t doing everything just for that one thing. And you-you’re the one who wanted to do the prank in the first place!” That was true; this one was on Jake.

“And our relationship.” They could both feel the inflection behind that, and Jake was certainly paying attention to inflections now. “Our relationship was fake so it-it didn’t matter.” Abruptly his defense stopped.

The two boys realized what had just been said, and neither had a response. A while passed before he could even think of answering that. But this was what Jake had been looking for, hadn’t it? Some clarification? Clearing up of a very messy situation? Well suddenly it was right in front of him and he didn’t know what to do with it.

“I-” Jake’s voice was shaky and he cleared it, trying to sound like he had any sort of stability. “I owed you for pretending to be with me for my parents, and I think, I hope that’s paid back by you using me to make Jeremy jealous.” A sorrowful look towards Michael is all he could manage. “Do you think that’s fair?”

Wordlessly, Michael nodded.

“Right. Good.” And he’d be lying if Jake said that this was how he imagined the day ending-If this was how he imagined him and Michael ending. But like the other boy had pointed out, it had all been fake. So what did it matter?

“Okay then. I think you should go.”

It’s only when Michael walked out of the room did Jake experience the crushing weight of the past few months falling on top of him. He staggered underneath this emotional load and maybe he would have even fallen if someone didn’t catch him. When had Michael walked back in?

He could hear the boy cursing as he stood himself up and suddenly they were standing face-to-face; in the next moment, Michael was pouring out his heart.

“What I said, that’s not what I meant. I mean fuck, it does matter, of course it matters. It matters to me a lot.” And it gives Jake enough strength to stare straight at his boyfriend-fake boyfriend-fake ex-boyfriend. But it’s not enough to erase what the relationship was used for by him. Still he continues.

“That’s how it started out, that’s true. It was because of my feeling for Jeremy because yes, I did have a crush on him, like a bad one. The thing was it didn’t matter-It didn’t matter because he was in love with Christine-and I can’t say that they’re completely gone. Okay? They-They haven’t completely disappeared. But you’ve shown me something different. You-You were my friend and now you-you’re something more than that.” And still Jake just stands there in the big empty house.

Michael releases a shuddering breath. “I was selfish, okay? I-I am selfish, not only with this but everything, it’s like I can see it now. I’m practically tainting everyone I touch, look-look at what I did to half of our friend group. Jeremy’s not talking and Rich is-I don’t even know. But it’s different when I’m with you. You’re so good and you-I-I-” A frustrated yell escaped him at the lack of words.
His hands were flying around as he tried to explain. “Like on the first night when you drove me home and-and we had that talk. I don’t tell people things about myself—Especially people I don’t know and yet that night—It all spilled out of me and why? Because you asked? And later, playing basketball with you when you were sad—Jesus, I fucking hate basketball. Or—Or telling you that Rich likes you—” Michael paused as tears embarrassingly formed in his eyes. “You—You make me want to do things for you. You make me selfless.”

The last word wasn’t yelled exactly, but it seemed to echo around them more than the others, resonating off of each body.

“I can—I can still leave if you want me to—”

Jake sighed heavily and then crushed Michael in a hug. After a couple moments of silence, Jake pulled back to look at him and say, “You hid your crush on your best friend from your best friend so that he could try and approach his crush. That’s pretty selfless.”

Michael laughs, pitifully, but at least it’s there, and it’s like neither boy can stand—stand anything any longer because their lips are crashing into each other; one fluid moment wanted by both.

An hour later, Michael had to uncurl himself from Jake dozing on the couch. “If I’m not home in like twenty minutes my parents are going to kill me.” Reluctantly they got up and Jake offered him a drive home but Michael refused. The walk home would give him time to think. Jake needed time to think too.

As his—whatever Michael was to him now, stepped out the front door which Jake was casually leaning against, he couldn’t help but softly ask, “What does this mean for us, Michael?” Because despite everything that happened, everything that was said, there was still so much left untouched.


He shrugged dejectedly, “I don’t know, Jake. I really don’t know. But I promise you, I am going to deal with it and get it all sorted out and I’ll—I’ll see you soon.”

He smiled as Michael walked away with a wave, but the heaviness refused to disappear. In truth, he could still feel the dread in his stomach and he knew what it signified; because if there’s one thing that Jake Dillinger has learned, it’s that people leave. And they don’t come back.
YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED, AN AMAZING WORK OF ART AT THE BOTTOM OF THIS PAGE.

Good. Notice it some more. This insane fanart was created by @sunniebanan on Instagram (or @strawhatruffy on Tumblr, go follow her this is beautiful)

Every time I post a chapter, I'm blown away by the comments, so you can imagine how I feel towards this beautiful picture. Huge thanks to her for making something off of my fic?? I'm so humbled?? Chances are I will never get over it and I'm so glad I'm able to show all my readers this.

I hope y'all liked the chapter-Can you believe we're almost at the end? :D

~Till next time

(alSO HAHA RICH ((the purest boi)) MADE THE PAINTING FROM THE VERY BEGINNING)
For Michael, it was more than overdue.

Three things.

Jake wasn’t in school on Monday of that week.
Rich was staring at Michael in one of their shared classes as if he was going to melt him simply by the intensity of the gaze.
And number three, Michael was feeling positively ill.

Had he caught something over the weekend? It had started out as a light headache in the morning that had been effectively ignored, but by midday, it was a raging migraine. His tongue felt heavy and affected, his head like someone was tapping the temple area with a hammer.

As a result, Michael couldn’t pay attention in class; barely even noticed Rich sending furtive looks his way. The thoughts unmercifully swirling through his mind about Jake and Jeremy and everything in between wasn’t helping; probably making it worse actually.

Leveling with himself, Michael realized that his skipping of lunch at school and inconsistent appetite had something to do with it. Whatever the case, dry-heaving in front of all his classmates wasn’t an appealing option. Timidly he raised his hand and asked to be sent to the nurse.

Maybe it was his weak tone of voice that convinced her, or the sickly-turning pallor of his skin but she allowed him to walk out. Exiting the room he heard behind him someone ask, “Can I go with him to make sure he gets there okay?”

Obviously she said yes to that student too, because a second later Rich was trailing behind him.

“That’s nice of you to come with me-” Michael started in polite conversation but almost immediately was interrupted.

“Listen, Michael, we need to talk.”

Abruptly they stopped in the middle of the empty hallway; ironically near the spot Michael told Jake about Rich.

“What? What do you need to talk to me about?” Michael questioned, managing to say that despite his pounding head.

Rich opened his mouth to speak but paused, considering something. He reached into his pants pocket and brought a chocolate granola bar, tossing it to the boy in front of him.

“First eat this, you look like you’re gonna collapse.”
He felt like he was going to collapse, which is why he should really be heading to the nurse, but it’d be faster to just get this over with.

Quickly he ate the bar, not even realizing how hungry he was until it was gone and he was wanting more. Even that small piece of food had helped though, showing immediate results. His mind cleared up a little bit and the headache lessened.

At the very least he was now more prepared to deal with whatever was about to happen.

Michael thanked Rich and motioned for him to reveal what he wanted to talk about, which he immediately began doing.

“Are you planning on breaking up with Jake?”

What?

He realized he was just thinking the word and not actually saying it out loud. “What? No! I-I don’t know?” Michael forced himself to swallow as the statement ended in a question without him intending it to.

Rich’s eyes hardened. “I don’t know?” His parents just left him, Michael. He’s poured all his adoration and attachment and whatever the fuck remaining trust he has into one person and that person— The unwavering resolute way in which Rich talked to anyone with, the way which Michael had been envious of; as if he wasn’t doubting anything he said, was in full force now. “-that person is standing in front of me, simultaneously torturing Jake by withholding a fucking clear answer and also trying to tell me that he doesn’t know whether or not he’s going to break my best friend’s heart.”

He was rendered speechless because really, what could you say to that? “I’m-I’m figuring it out?” Michael offered weakly.

Rich took a deep breath. “Look, I’m not trying to guilt or pressure you into staying with him, that’s not what I want. All I’m saying is that you need to hurry up and come to a decision because Jake has been hurt enough, okay?”

He breathed out again and all Michael could think was maybe Jake wasn’t the only one who’s been hurt. But before the sympathy could even start, Rich looked at him wide and said, “Imagine what it feels like to know your best friend burnt down your house.”

Lost in how to comfort this boy until it was too late, the moment passed and Rich was composing himself. “I am ordering and begging you all at once: Get your shit together-I know it’s probably a lot but, either option. Let him out of this purgatory, okay?”

Wordlessly Michael nodded before realizing he had barely spoken a single word this entire conversation. “Yeah...yeah, okay.” That wasn’t the only thing he was realizing, though. Suddenly he was also thinking of just how good a friend Richard Goranski was.

Rich nodded like it was all settled, but there was a thought still lingering in Michael’s mind.

“But Rich, why are you telling me this-Well for Jake, I get that. But don’t you-I mean, I know the
signs. I’ve lived with them for like four years.”

It looked like he was debating whether or not he was going to even say anything in response before giving in. “It’s just a crush,” Was his dismissive remark. “I’ll get over it.”

“You shouldn’t have to-”

“Michael, I appreciate what you’re doing but you can’t fool me either. Maybe it started out as a prank, but anyone can see the way you look at each other. The way you care for each other. And I do mean anyone.”

“But you care for him too, Rich! And he cares for you-”

“He does. But not in that way, and we both know it.”

“I’m not so sure about that-”

With a dark but imploring look Rich asked, “Why are you trying so hard for this, Michael? What are you scared of?”

The question caused Michael to look away. It was a good one. Why was he sabotaging himself so much?

What was he scared of?

He had only wanted to go to the nurse and here he was having a heart-to-heart with Richard Goranski of all people, in the same hallway walls he used to slam Jeremy against.

But since they were here...

“Everything, dude. All of it fucking scares me. Like suddenly neither of them were an option and, I mean, I always imagined having someone with me-Honestly, I was thinking until college. But now both of them are here in front of me-” Michael exhaled, stunned at the words and also the embarrassing confession that he hadn’t expected a boyfriend till college. “Yeah, like you said. It’s a lot. But you’re right, it’s not fair for either of them to keep on going like this.”

“The fear isn’t going to go away if you just stare at it.” Rich advised him with an unreadable expression. “Don’t let it control you.”

Michael leaned against a locker, slouching until he was almost, but not quite, level with the shorter boy. “Easier said than done.”

“Touche.”

“But I’ll find a...solution, I guess.”

“Do that. Just don’t burn any houses in the process. Easier that way.”
Add laughing in the empty school hallways with Rich to the list of experiences Michael hadn’t expected this morning.

“She’s get your sick ass to the nurse’s office.”

“Actually Rich...I think I’m feeling better.”

“Yeah well, we’re gonna go anyway. I was about to fall asleep in that class.”

Michael spent the rest of the school day with Rich, and it was nice. Not that he had so many other options.

Jeremy was avoiding him like the plague and amidst Michael desperately trying not to remember what had happened during the Squip days, he realized that was probably for the best. At least for now.

Maybe he didn’t want to lose Jake (okay, there was no maybe about it), but the solid fact also remained that he wasn’t ready to lose his best friend either.

That was only making the whole decision process harder.

As far as the others; Chloe and Brooke were constantly talking about the upcoming prom season and Michael wasn’t feeling equipped enough to answer the questions about him and Jake that would undoubtedly come with that discussion.

Meanwhile, Christine had been sitting with Jenna at lunch, both animatedly talking to their table and Michael really only wanted to handle one person at a time today.

As they walked from class to class, Michael came to the understanding that this was the first time he had ever hung out alone with Rich. Still, it seemed insane that he had never before noticed the patches of kids who called out “Arsonist!” in a laughing shout as they—or more accurately, Rich—passed.

Startled, he realized it was because Jake wasn’t with them.

Michael paid close attention to him after it happened a couple of times, trying to notice if Rich was visibly affected.

But if he was, it didn’t show. The boy practically glided along the dirty floors and past the students with nothing more than an unconcerned smile.

They engaged in conversation whenever they could; as the teacher stepped out of the classroom, through the throng of bodies and noise that composed the hallways.

Most of it was just jokes, offhand comments or biting witty remarks. (The two made a very sarcastic pair.)

But there was one exchange that remained stuck in Michael’s head for the rest of the week.

It had started off as Michael complimenting Rich, actually. He remembered how Jake had told him through a smug sounding text that No, Rich wasn’t in love him. Told you all along.
That had prompted Michael to tell Rich that he was a great friend to Jake; he wasn’t sure if he himself could have done that. But the boy had just shrugged, “I like to believe that stuff like that makes up for how I treated people when I had the Squip?”

Michael raised an eyebrow. “People?”

“Do you need me to spell it out for you?” Rich had a kind-of grin on his lips. “Jeremy, and you. Other kids I thought were in my way."

It was a bit shocking to find out that even in his everyday life, Rich was trying to atone for what he had done. Or, what the Squip had done.

“But that wasn’t you, that was the-”

“Squin. Yeah, I know. I’m not denying that. But to them, it was me. And after all, who took the pill in the first place?”

“That is some incredible self-realization. I kind of feel like we should be having this conversation high?”

“Michael Mell, a stoner kid. Who would have thought?” Rich said with mock surprise. “Are you offering to get high with me?”

“One day, Richard. One day.”

It was relieving to alleviate some of the heaviness of the conversation; here was still something Michael had to say though. He felt he owed it to the boy.

“You should know that Jeremy forgave you a long time ago.” That was more than true and as for Michael…

“And you? Not that you need to or anything, I’m just asking. It’d be nice to know where I stand.”

“Yeah, man. Of course I forgive you.”

For Michael, it was more than overdue.

Talking to Rich about these things helped, but it wasn’t until the next day, with Jake back in school yet keeping a respectful distance, that Michael realized that his mind felt more...settled. And if it wasn’t clear before, it became so that day. Everything else, all these choices and decisions plaguing him, also needed to be settled.

That’s why on Tuesday night-Or more accurately morning; it was already 2:47 a.m.-Michael was sitting on the living room couch, wearing only a thin white t-shirt and an old pair of red boxers. He was sitting there thinking. Sorting through everything experienced these past months; weighing thoughts, feelings and emotions.

His parents were off in a cruise they had booked almost half a year in advance. They hadn’t been extremely eager to leave Michael here alone after what happened between them, but the tickets were non-refundable.

He was all alone in the house and not expecting anyone, especially at almost three on a school night,
which was a perfectly good excuse for why he shrilly screamed when the doorbell rang.

Heart pounding with fear, a kitchen knife in one hand and his phone with “9-1-1” already typed out in the other, he slowly approached the door and with bated breath, peeked through the peephole.

Both objects dropped from his hands in surprise, one almost stabbing his bare foot.

He kicked it away before hurriedly unlocking the door and whipping it open, revealing the same sight he had seen through the door’s eyelet.

Jeremy standing on his doorstep, looking shaky and unnerved, with tears streaming down his face.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, I love all of you, also it's almost my birthday! 2 days mamacitas, not 100% sure why I called y'all that.
Anyway, did you ask for Rich development because here it is.
Did you ask for more struggle choosing who should be endgame because that's coming up.

As always, my soul is only validation so keep me alive por favor, and also thank you for reading.
We're aLMOST DONE WITH THIS JOURNEY LADS
Jake was sitting on a stool in front of the kitchen island, talking to Rich on the phone despite the late hour. It was 2:15 a.m. and a school night. Usually he didn’t like sitting in the kitchen. It never failed to remind him of his parents, who were god knows where by now.

But out of sight didn’t equal out of mind in this case. More often than he would ever admit, Jake would think he saw his mom opening the fridge out of the corner of his eye; or glimpse his dad walking out from the dining room. But always, always, without fail, it’d turn out to be just his imagination.

On the phone him and Rich talked about many different things for what was now a couple of hours, but the conversation inevitably turned to, well, what else was happening in his life?

“It’s been days, Rich-”

“Yeah, like two, Jakie -”

“And I’m dying. It’s killing me,” Jake said, not at all dramatically.

"I have a feeling he’s going to decide soon, hang in there.”

But that thought made Jake grow silent.

“Jake? You still there?”

“Yeah, I’m still here. It’s just, thinking of him coming to a decision is equally bad.”

Rich paused for a moment too. “Whatever Michael chooses, it’s on him, okay? You’re not going to blame yourself for it?”

Instead of answering directly, Jake mused in a teasing tone, “Maybe I should just date you, since you’re always there for me.”

Without missing a beat, Rich snorted. “As if you could handle all of this.” Not that they could see each other, but Jake was positive Rich was showing off his body with a flourish of his hand.

“I could totally handle you, you’re a handful.”

“That’s my point.”

“No, I mean you’re a literal handful. Because you’re so short.”
Rich’s faux words of venom were cut off by a pounding on Jake’s front door, causing the boy to almost fly off his chair in surprise.

“Jake? Everything okay?”

“Uh…”

He was too distracted looking for a weapon to fully answer.

After several agonizingly long seconds had passed as Jake frantically searched the kitchen, (He really had to do the dishes more often. How were all the knives dirty?), he gave up, grabbing a dirty steak knife and headed towards the door.

“If you hear me getting murdered, call the police.” Jake whispered to Rich before placing the phone on the family room coffee table.

“Jake?! What the fuck-”

Out of earshot by the time he reached the door, Jake tried to make out who it was by peering through the glass on either side of the door. Fear spiked his heart as he witnessed a hooded figure wearing a jacket and jeans.

It quickly turned to confusion when he flicked on the outside light and it illuminated a nervous looking Jeremy Heere.

Jake carefully set down the knife and opened the door, watching as Jeremy’s anxious expression turned-Or at the very least tried to turn to one of hard-set resoluteness.

“Jeremy? It’s two a.m., what the hell are you doing here?” He paused a moment, “Ha, Heere-”

“Listen, Jake.” Jeremy interrupted with a rolling of his eyes. He was all too accustomed to the “Here/Heere” jokes. “I’m here to talk to you.”

“Couldn’t you have done that over texts?”

“No. Not really. I would never have sent what I needed to ask. This-This forces me to do it.”

Jake couldn’t help but look at him strangely. Nevertheless, he stepped aside and invited Jeremy in.

“Next time you unexpectedly show up at someone’s house in the middle of the night, ring the doorbell instead of knocking like a murderer. I thought you were a burglar.”

Jeremy stared, standing in front of the couch but not sitting. “If I was a burglar, why would I knock on the door? Or ring the doorbell for that matter. That would totally alert you to my presence-”

“Okay, not the most important discussion here.” Jake interjected, also standing. “I was just scared for my life.”

“What?”

“Nothing. The reason I showed up on your doorstep at-” He pulled out his phone and clicked it on, “-2:20 a.m., is because there’s a question I have to ask. And it’s important.”

Jake nodded. “Well go ahead then.”

“What are you feelings for Michael?”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, what are you feelings for Mich-”

“Yeah, no I heard you. I’m just wondering why the hell you’re asking that.”

Maybe that was too harsh for the simple question, but Jake hadn’t been the one to show up randomly at a ridiculous hour. And, well... It was very well possible that after hearing about Michael’s crush on the boy in front of him, he was just a bit defensive.

Plus, it was nowhere near as harsh as what was about to be exchanged between the two.

Jeremy’s arms crossed defiantly. Now there really was no sign of nervousness, completely taken over by what Jake assumed was self-righteousness.

“I’m his best friend. I have a right to know.”

“You have a right to know? If you’re so curious about our relationship-” And Jake did notice the slight flinch at the word, “-then why don’t you ask Michael?”

“Because,” he replied in a tone that made it sound like it should be obvious. “I want to know what you think about him. This was just a prank, wasn’t it?”

Jake crossed his arms in similar fashion. “I’m not sure what to tell you, Jeremy. I don’t think two in the morning is the right time to have this conversation.”

“Then when is?”

“How about never? I’ve no obligation to spill my feelings to you.”

“Why not, huh? Do you not actually like him in that way? Is that why you’re not telling me, because you think I’ll tell him as soon as possible? Because you’re right-”

Jake eyes narrowed in anger. His voice was heavy with the accusation and he barely resisted a very dramatic, “How dare you?”

Instead he said, “You have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about, and I suggest you stop guessing.”

“Just tell me. Do you like him? Do you care-”

“Yes, Jeremy, okay? Yes, I like him a lot and of course I care for him. And he cares for me too. Are you happy?”
But a stranger could look at Jeremy’s face and see he was nowhere near happy at the confession. Both himself and his emotions were raging; Jake got the feeling something bad was going to go down.

He was right. Jeremy struck hard and fast. Not physically of course; it was no guess as to who would win in an actual fight. But fists aren’t the only thing that can hurt.

“Why would Michael call it a mistake then?”

Jake wasn’t rushing to believe him at first, but there was something in his tone that forced him to consider he was telling the truth. It wasn’t just vexation; there was honest to god curiosity. Jeremy desperately wanted to know how serious this fake relationship could possibly be when Michael called it a mistake.

With a sinking heart, Jake believed him.

“I don’t know why he would call it that.” He admitted. Neither knew what to say in the face of that until Jake asked, “Are you trying to find out if I don’t care for Michael, or if he doesn’t care for me?”

“Sheer. Both. I don’t know.” Jeremy sounded lost, almost pitifully so. But Jake didn’t care...That much. His exasperation from before hadn’t disappeared.

“Why, Jeremy? You can’t just let him deal with it, or let him be happy? What do you think is even going to happen, he’s going to desert you?”

It was ironic, almost, that Jeremy would fear that when he was the one who subjected Michael to it in the first place.

With a start, Jake realized maybe he wasn’t as forgiving of Jeremy’s situation as he originally thought. And maybe he should have been, but in that moment all he felt was resentment at how Jeremy seemed so prone to taking Michael for granted.

In front of him, the boy in question was struggling to put his thoughts into a coherent sentence. “I’m not-Obviously I want Michael to be happy. I want him to be happy with-” His speech faltered. “-With whoever makes him happy. And if he wants to leave me behind-”

Jake had never felt such a fierce protectiveness for someone as his loud scoff interrupted Jeremy’s words.

“You’re insane if you think Michael would abandon you.” He’s not you, Jake almost snapped, just barely managing to keep it in. “I mean you are seriously oblivious. Michael is so stricken with you, you could ask for the moon and he’d find a way to deliver it to your doorstep.”

The words were said with a sad type of jealousy, and as Jeremy dealt with a whole new surge of emotions, Jake was amazed, realizing just how much he had changed since the beginning of this.

Jeremy’s response still came back quick as a whip however. “I’ve known him for years, Jake. He’s my best friend and I’m not some pretty boy who’s gonna take interest for a month and then move on-”

“Are you saying I am?” Jake could feel any control slipping away with his words. “Because out of
the two people standing in this room, only one of us has abandoned him before and it wasn’t me.”

The rapid fire back and forth stopped. Jeremy’s mouth hung open in shock until he could formulate a weak reply. “That-That was the Squip-”

“That was you.” Jake insisted, trying, trying to understand how it was possible to love someone like Michael Mell and then give him up. As soon as it was out, Jake found himself continuing without restraint. “And if you know him so well, do you also know that he’s terrified of you ignoring him again? Of being left behind? Did you know he has nightmares about it?”

The color draining from Jeremy’s face, leaving it shallow and pale was all the answer Jake needed.

“You didn’t even know him.” Jeremy tried to protest, but the impact of the words had hit him hard, and his defense was shaky.

“I know him now. And even if he does think it’s a mistake, even if it was just a joke to him and he doesn’t-” Jake forced himself to accept it as reality. “Even if he doesn’t care, I’d never abandon him. That’s more than enough.”

Jake had gone too far. Maybe. He couldn’t tell, and right now he didn’t care. His words had been nothing but the truth, and conceivably, they counted even more because Jake actually knew how it felt to be abandoned. And he wouldn’t want it to happen to anyone. Not Jeremy. Not Rich. Definitely not Michael.

Talking about Jeremy...The boy had been shocked into silence. They both stood, facing each other without speaking but searching for something to break the excruciating silence.

“Did he-Does he really have nightmares about it?” Jeremy asked in a quiet voice after minutes had passed. “He told you this?”

Jake thought back to the camping trip, the doleful way the dream had effected Michael. “I witnessed it.”

It wasn’t the right pair of words to say without context. Jeremy’s face went red and his eyes widened; it took a second for Jake to catch on. “No, no. I wasn’t-We weren’t sleeping together. It was during the camping trip.” Jake felt like covering his face with his hands. What happened to, It’s none of your business.

The looks exchanged between the two wasn’t understanding per say, a fair deal of suspicion still existed in the gaze. But there wasn’t as much rage as before. The hurt Jeremy was feeling paired with the realization brought forward by their argument showed clearly on his face.

But it didn’t feel like Jake’s place to try and comfort him; he had been the one who caused it in the first place. It was up to Jeremy to come to terms with this new info.

Still, as he watched the boy walk off down the sidewalk in the middle of the night, Jake hoped, despite all the running emotions they had flung at each other, that he would be okay.

With a heavy sigh that somehow managed to contain everything he was feeling, Jake sat down on
his couch and closed his eyes, unwillingly reliving what had just happened.

He somewhat doubted it, but maybe he would be able to get some sleep and not be bone-tired tomorrow.

“Jake?” Rich’s whispering voice came from in front of him. He peeked open an eye and saw the phone, screen black but call obviously still going, sitting where he had left it on the coffee table.

With a groan, Jake reached forward and snatched it up, tiredly holding it to his ear.

“How?”

“Hey. I have a question.”

“Go ahead.”

“What the fuck?”

Jake winced at the shout directly into his ear canal and held the phone somewhat away from him in case it happened again.

“Uh, hi? How much of that did you hear?”

“All of it.”

“Yeah, I didn’t actually mean for that to happen. I forgot you were still on the phone.” Jake tried to lighten his tone, “You were totally eavesdropping and you didn’t even hang up-”

“Jake-”

He gave up on the effort. “Yeah, yeah I know. What did you think of-” He paused, trying to come up with the proper word. He didn’t find it. “That.”

“What do I think? I think that you guys are carrying a lot of emotion, and it was bound to come out sooner or later.”

“You should be a therapist-”

“I’m not done, Jake. This wasn’t the best way to get rid of it-I mean you guys literally just yelled your insecurities at each other.”

“Tone down the therapy, tone down the therapy-”

Rich took a deep breath, and though his were gone, Jake was still receiving a very parental vibe from the phone call.

“You should get some sleep, man, I still believe what I said before. Michael is going to make a decision soon. And whatever it is-”

“Whatever it is, I’ll be fine.”

“And if you’re not?”

“Then I’ll get over it. You don’t need to worry about me every day, Rich.”
“That’s not going to stop me.” His tone turned to one of firm finality. “Goodbye, Jake.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Chapter End Notes

Which boy is in the wrong?
Which boy is in the right?
Neither? Both?

aLSO, as someone who was watching those "Top 5 scariest moments caught on video" late at night (tonight...right now, im so scared), the tHOUGHT OF SOMEONE BREAKING IN IS SO TERRIFYING, and if someone knocked on my door in the middle of the night and my parents weren't home,,,,911 iTS AN EMERGENCY

Thank you for all the sweet birthday wishes and as always, comments and kudos are greatly appreciated
~Till next time
I need to save him.

Chapter Notes

The ending notes will be v important so please give that a read, as always thank you guys for tuning in. I’m actually lowkey proud of this chapter, so I hope y’all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ever since their entire ridiculous scheme had started in the first place, unexpected things occurred. Not on a normal-level, not a “This makes life exciting” level. But rather, an extremely strange measure that had Michael facing every day with an uneasy trepidation.

Or every middle-of-the-night, as in this instance.

They were now both sitting down on his bed, him and Jeremy, having moved down to Michael’s room only after the boy had been made a cup of tea. Now, wrapped up in a blanket at Michael’s own insistence, Jeremy was ready to tell him what happened.

At least Michael thought he was. But that’s not the direction it went in.

When they first sat down, Michael was unsure if it was going to go in any direction at all. Slowly, Jeremy’s tears that had so alarmed him upon opening the door had dried on his cheeks, yet he seemed in no rush to disclose anything.

Instead, Michael received a stare full of misery, that set him even more on edge.

“Jeremy, I don’t want to push you…” That was a true statement. Michael had never seen his best friend look this fragile. “It is like, three in the morning though. Does your dad know that you—Are here, right now?”

A while passed, time that Michael spent trying to decipher Jeremy’s sorrowful expression, before he answered with a slow nod. “Yes. I mean-No, he doesn’t know about the—the uh-He thinks I’m sleeping over at your house.”

“Which you probably are.” Michael insinuated, fairly certain he wasn’t going to let Jeremy wander out of this house in the early morning hours. “If you don’t want to talk, dude, that’s fine. You know, you don’t have to. We can—I don’t know, we can talk about it tomorrow. Or not. Whatever-Whatever floats your boat.” He winced at how awkward his running commentary was. “Right now, if you want to play video games? Actually, you should probably go to sleep. We have school tomorrow and like, I’m fifty percent certain you have a Spanish test—”

“I’m sorry.”

“And no offense or anything, but your spanish, heh, chupa culo-What?”
Jeremy had been staring at Michael for the past five minutes, but only now was he being hit by the intensity of the gaze.

“What did you say?” He asked.

“I’m sorry.” Jeremy repeated, clear as day.

“Sorry for-for what? What did you do?”

“What didn’t I do, Michael?”

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific buddy.” Michael’s words were cut off by Jeremy leaning forward to tightly grab his wrists, as if the gesture could express more explicitly what he couldn’t.

“I’m-I’m so sorry for everything. I need to—I’d like to apologize. Once and for all.” He felt worry flare up in his chest as the tears they had waited so long to go away started to well up once more in Jeremy’s eyes.

“I can’t think of anything you need to apologize for—”

“Let me do this, Michael. Please.”

Pushing aside the confusion, Michael gave him a silent nod.

“I’m sorry for not-not being more supportive of yours and Jake’s relationship. Even if it was fake, I didn’t-I think it hurt to see you guys together and instead of dealing with it, I just ignored it and it got worse and I’m sorry.”

A small smile appeared on Michael’s lips; he couldn’t help it. He was proud of Jeremy for doing this. “I forg-”

“I’m not done!” Jeremy exclaimed shakily, surprising Michael. “I’m not done and I need to get this all out.”

So he continued.

“I’m sorry for freaking out so much when you told me it was a prank between you guys and I’m sorry for telling you that Rich had a crush on Jake. That was—that was stupid of me, and wrong and I never even addressed it with you afterwards and my—my actions aren’t excusable—they sucked. And uh, remember your words about um…” At this, even despite the tears, Jeremy turned red. “About being the poster child for—”

_I said, I never had that chance. So don’t you goddamn tell me that I don’t know what it’s like because I should be the fucking poster child._

“Yeah, yeah, I remember.” Michael hurriedly cut in and confirmed, also turning an abnormal shade.

“Yeah, that. I’m sorry for not realizing it sooner and for—Jesus, I don’t even know how many times I gushed about Christine to you—”

“That is not something you have to apologize for, Jeremy. And I’m firm on that.” To prove his point, he gave the boy in front of him a stern look. “You didn’t have any control over who you like—No one does. And no one should have to say they’re sorry for it.” Nevermind the fact Michael had thought
about apologizing for his crush on Jeremy several times. “Okay?”

Jeremy thought for a moment before relenting. “Okay. I apologize for that one apology.”

Michael snorted but still felt happiness well up inside him as he realized he was finally working things out with his best friend.

“Now can I accept your other apologies?”

Not yet, it seemed. Jeremy’s face darkened at the question and he solemnly shook his head. “There’s still one thing I need to apologize for.”

“If you say so; go ahead.”

“For me for-”

“For me for? What are you going to say next? I beg your pardon?” Michael asked, if only to see Jeremy smile before they headed down whatever verbal path this was. It worked; he let out a small laugh while also blushing in embarrassment. Lightly, Jeremy pushed Michael and cleared his throat.

It was silent for a couple of moments as he waited for the boy to start. This apology, compared to the other ones which had been delivered almost as if they had been rehearsed, was all over the place. Jeremy stumbled more than usual over his words trying to force them out,

“I’m sorry- I beg your pardon for-” The begrudging grin faded, “-For, what-um, what happened last year. During the-I mean, what went on with the Squip.”

This new set of words didn’t cause any less bafflement for Michael.

“Jeremy, we don’t need to go over th-” But the boy went on unheeding,

“Calling you-You know, what happened in the bathroom, d-during Jake’s hal-halloween party. And be-before that, I-He blocked you. Or- Or I blocked you-The point is you were gone and I didn’t-I didn’t-” Jeremy’s speech became heavier and more filled as both the memories and emotion overwhelmed him.

“But that wasn’t you, Jer, that was the Squip.”

Michael felt his heart rate increase as Jeremy neared the edge of hyperventilating, desperate to finish what he started.

“The Squip told me to do it, and I was under-under his- it’s influence, but I listened, I listened, Michael and I never really-I just didn’t apologize for it-” Jeremy let out a gasp for breath, laboring to remain controlled, but Michael could tell. It was one of the things that came from twelve years of friendship; with just a look at the other person you could realize what was going on. And Michael knew that Jeremy was freaking out, and that if he didn’t do something it would only get worse.

But what could he do?

“But Michael, you need to know, I-I just have to make you understand, I’m so-I’m so sorry-”

The entire time Michael was internally debating, Jeremy was continue to babble out his apology, now truly losing any sense of calm. Tears were streaming down his face, his hands were flailing wildly, and strangely, all Jeremy’s best friend could think before kissing him was, I need to save him.

It was a peculiar thought, not entirely coherent either; but Michael held onto it the same way he held
Jeremy’s arms, stilling them to his side as he pressed his own lips against those in front of him.

Jeremy immediately quieted, eyes closing on instinct. He leaned forward to push back against Michael’s force; a sudden game of intimate power.

The kiss,

Was sweet. There was the distinct flavor of both oranges and chocolate, leaving Michael distantly wondering if Jeremy had eaten some combination of the sort before coming here. It also tasted like years of wanting satisfied, like something natural, like the love that exists between the closest of friends, and maybe something more.

Was salty, relished by tears that were now quelled, and possibly also soured by the question of betrayal. Or, if that was too harsh a word, then maybe duplicity or deception. But it was not a question he could focus on for long, far too many other thoughts were pushing it aside.

Lasted for what seemed like a lifetime, and yet they were pulling away as soon as some sort of sense was able to filter back in. Just like at the beginning of this morning-night, they were staring at each other. For exactly seven seconds.

And then they were kissing once more, without any concern or regard for the outside world, like being pulled apart was only temporary and now was the time to find each other again.

When they stopped the second time, the final time probably, Michael looked not just into Jeremy’s eyes but into the boy himself, and speaking with such a pure sincerity he hadn’t known he could harness, whispered, “There’s nothing to forgive.”

Jeremy’s eyebrows knit together in uncertainty and so Michael swiftly amended, “If there is something to forgive, consider it forgiven. I forgive you, Jeremy.” The corner of his lips quirked up, “You have my pardon.”

When Michael woke up, his first thought was that he didn’t remember going to sleep, and though he tried to remember at exactly what point they had dozed off, it wasn’t coming back to him. It could be that having Jeremy curled up next to him, softly slumbering against his chest was distracting his thoughts.

Yeah, that was definitely it.

With careful moments, Michael arched his neck to look at the alarm clock sitting on his bedside table, noting that they still had a full two and a half hours before school. The quiet morning provided a sense of peace, that even despite the realization of what last night meant, Michael was able to somewhat put his thoughts into order.
He had thought last night, before Jeremy arrived, that he was nearing a decision. That maybe he was going to make the right choice and not have to wonder, ‘What if?’ But the dawning sun had brought a whole new wave of confliction, and now everything was up in the air.

Everything except for the fact that Michael didn’t even have time to thoughtfully ponder a decision, because it was cruel to the boys involved.

His eyes sleepily closed, not a single part of him accustomed to waking up this early, but his mind was still alert enough to try and think it all through.

Jeremy shifted in his sleep, wrapping himself even more around Michael in a position that would have turned him as red as a tomato had he been aware of it.

Michael felt a soft thumping in his chest when he gazed down at the boy, a thumping that hadn’t been foreign to him either when looking at Jake. Blissfully, he thought about how this had all started out and whether or not they were better off now.

With Jeremy’s heartfelt apologies still reposing in the silent air around them, floating right next to the memories Michael had made these past months, it seemed the answer was a resounding yes.

Michael’s movements were cautiously attentive, keeping one eye open to peek at Jeremy as he tenderly ran one hand through the brunette’s fluffy bedhead hair, in a fashion he had often only dreamed of doing. His heart fluttered rapidly, and then rested.

Before the alarm clock would loudly blare, signaling that it was time to truly get up and prepare for the school day, Michael slipped deeper underneath the shared blanket and in an irrevocable manner, something he knew he wouldn’t- couldn’t, go back on, he made a decision.

Chapter End Notes

You were promised a very important note and here it is.
We are almost at the end of this, so close I can taste it, and so the most pressing question, one that I imagine is on everyone's mind is,
What is the endgame? Who will end up together?

Well, I'm going to leave that up to you guys. (I'm a Libra, so indecisive)
In the comments of this chapter, all you have to do is leave the name of the ship you want to see endgame, or even just the name of the two people you want to see together, and soon in the future I will count the votes and write up the final chapter accordingly.
Boardwalk Boys is not an endgame, unfortunately, sorry, but we do have either Boyfriends, or Prep Game. (While I can't guarantee that Rich/Jake will become a thing if Boyfriends is chosen, there is a possibility of that happening also)

Along with your vote, any thoughts about this chapter is as always, appreciated. I love y'all dearly, and I'll see you soon with the next update.
~Till next time
It was just them and a kiss.

Chapter Notes

Hello my dearest, wonderful readers. We’ve come to the finale, and I hope it satisfies. Enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jake was fine.

It was a school day, and he had a French test that he remembered about fifty minutes before it took place.

That was fine.

Him and Rich were strangely silent together, maybe knowing that something, no matter what it was, was going to go down today, and it kept them more somber. But the quiet was a companionable one so,

That was fine.

Jake had arrived early to school (not even for a logical reason, he really should have been getting every single minute of sleep he could, considering the night before) expecting to be one of the early ones there. He wasn’t however; Michael and Jeremy had beaten him. There was no way for them to see him, hidden as he was in his parked car, but he was granted a full view of them. And as they rose up to go inside, Michael’s hands brushing Jeremy’s in a comforting gesture, further confirmed by a tight hug-A hug that wasn’t just a hug, it was a signal, it was a message, that Jake translated instantly- and his heart was shattering, or at least that’s what it felt like and-

That was fine.

So all in all, Jake was fine. And really, truly, he didn’t cry. Because Jake Dillinger, star of both of the football and basketball teams, most popular kid in school, suave supreme, did not cry. That would be ridiculous.
What he did do, was wait, frozen in his car, even as dozens of students filtered past him, until the bell was ringing and the doors were closing, and in an ironic twist he was almost late for first class.

It hardly mattered anyway, seeing as how it couldn’t be said he was paying attention. While the teacher seemed to mindlessly drone on and on, Jake was struggling to come to terms with what he saw, and what he thought, what he knew, it meant.

Michael had chosen Jeremy. Okay. That was (hurtful, outrageous, wounding, ridiculous) understandable. They had known each other for longer, as the latter boy had pointed out. On top of Michael liking Jeremy to begin with, it really fell into place.

That’s not to say Jake hadn’t been hoping for something different. Yet, if that was the way everything would played out, if that was how their story ended then...

Maybe it would take him a little while to get over it, to fully accept it, but that didn’t change what he had told Rich. He would be fine. Even with an Angelina Jolie-esque voice telling him that this shouldn’t be a surprise, after all didn’t Jake’s own parents do the same thing? Really, if a kid could get his flesh and blood to drive off, then what hope did this teenager stand? This teenager, who had stolen Jake’s trust and heart and a million other things, things he was now carefully holding in his hand, ready to break it-

It was difficult, but Jake managed to cut off the voice.

Just barely though. And not before it reassured him it’d be back later today.

He would be fine. He would be fine. He would be fine.

It was a mantra that carried him through half the day.

Unfortunately, there was something that Jake forgot. Even if he did know that Michael had chosen Jeremy, Michael did not know that Jake knew that Michael chose Jeremy.

Quickly enough however, he was reminded, when Michael confronted him on his way to lunch.

They waited as the rest of the students filed in, hurriedly brushing past them. Jake noticed Rich sending him a supportive look. He pretended not to see Jeremy’s small smile at Michael, which only helped to establish more thoroughly his secret thoughts.

It seemed like a long time before the hallway was clear of loud, talkative kids, but soon enough they were left alone, like the multiple times before, in an empty hallway.

Jake flipped through all the times they had had an encounter here, all-or mostly at least, alone.

Michael almost getting beat up; luckily saved just in time,

Jake kissing him for the first time not because someone was watching and expected it, but the reason
simply being because he had genuinely, undoubtedly, desperately wanted to.

Michael telling Jake about Rich liking him.

Had that been the beginning of the end? Or had the end always been written out since the beginning?

Michael was in the middle of taking a deep breath, composing himself for inevitably breaking the harsh news when Jake realized, he couldn’t take it.

Not in that way. Yes, of course he was going to accept Michael’s final decision. He wasn’t going to freak out, or cause a scene, or be mean towards his boyf-ex boyfriend, fake ex-boyfriend. Ex-fake ex-boyfriend, (How would he ever explain this to anybody?).

The endgame was the endgame. Jake was actually reminded of his football coach, looking at the team after a match with a resigned look. He’d stare at every player in turn before saying, “A win is a win. A loss is a loss.”

Today was a loss.

Point is, not in that way. What he was trying to say was that now the final decision, which Jake had been coming to terms with all morning, was in front of him. It had always been a distant reality, but now it was truly there. Maybe he had enough strength to accept it by himself, but he definitely didn’t have enough to receive it from Michael, along with the sad pitying look that would obviously be paired along.

As a result, Michael barely had the chance to get out, “So, Jake-” Before he was interrupted, first with a hand being held up in “Stop” fashion, and then with words. Not just any words, but sentences and phrases that felt slick and smooth, as if they had been spun from midnight velvet, and not the tongue of a heartbroken boy.

“Michael, listen. I don’t want you to do this. I understand what you did, and who you chose and I’m thankful I was apart of it.” Jake didn’t stop as confusion ran across Michael’s features, nor when it shifted to a mournful type of look. “But it’s over now. We both understand that. There’s no need to go into it or hash it all out.”

“So-So you don’t wa-want to-”

A casual expression of acceptance—far too casual for what they were talking about, startling actually—Was he completely neutral on this matter?—was all Michael saw staring back at him.

“No. We’re done.”

“O-Okay.” Michael’s voice was choked and almost unintelligible. “That is-That’s-I was go-going to say-”

“I got it, Michael.”
“Do you think we-We can-I mean, I h-hope that we can st-still friends-uh, be, be-”

Jake smiled, insincerely. He didn’t mean for it to come across that way, it’s just that what he was feeling inside, quite the opposite of what he was trying to show, could not possibly be equated to a smile. “Friends? Of course we can.”

There didn’t seem to be anything else to say-Or anything else to do for that matter. Well, maybe one thing. Jake figured he had lost the right to a kiss, even if it was to say goodbye. But surely, a quick peck on the forehead wouldn’t get him into too much trouble?

Even if it would, he couldn’t find it in himself to care right now.

So Jake swiftly leaned forward and with the gentleness one reserved for a newborn baby, planted a soft kiss on Michael’s forehead. He felt the boy freeze beneath his touch, which caused his heart to sink even more than it already had. Jake had been wrong, he had pushed his boundaries and now Michael was uncomfortable.

A deep aching rhythm started somewhere in his chest. Best to get out of here as quick as possible.

“I’ll see you around, Michael, yeah?” And Jake briskly retreated into the lunchroom, fast enough to just barely hear Michael’s stifled reply, “Yeah.”

But there was no sign of him the rest of the lunch.

Jake told Rich what had happened. Not exactly of course; he was paraphrasing. Something along the lines of, Michael had chosen Jeremy and Jake said he understood.

It was sweet, the instantly concerned looks Rich sent his way, along with a murmured, “Are you okay, man?” But it wasn’t a question Jake could answer right now. He’d rather just finish the day without talking about it, and then go home.

Just because they weren’t talking about it however, didn’t mean Jake stopped himself from thinking about it, which he did for the rest of the school hours, consistently replaying the words spoken over and over.

It caused him to realize that, with a sardonic twist, it had almost sounded like Jake was breaking up with Michael.

“Jake broke up with me.” Was what Michael wanted to say-No, wanted to scream, at anyone who would listen.

But who could he tell?

Certainly not Jeremy. For starters, everything they had conversed about was muddled by this now. The two hours they had spent talking it out before school, sitting next to each other on the bed just like the night before was...all for nothing?

It hadn’t seemed that way as it was happening. No, it had really seemed moving and profound.

Michael had slowly, painstakingly explained that he did care for Jeremy and nothing was ever going to change that: “But you feel the same way towards Jake. And you choose him.” Jeremy had finished for him.
The response was a hesitant nod.

“Okay, Michael.”

“Okay? I mean, yes okay. Are you okay?”

Jeremy looked at him, smiling sadly but also in a way that asked if he was an idiot. “I’m not feeling super peachy, after hearing your choice and knowing it’s not me but…” He took a deep breath. “Last night, more than anything, showed me that I shouldn’t hold everything in until it bursts out and I’m standing on someone’s doorstep in the middle of the night.”

Reluctantly, Michael allowed himself to grin at that, but he was still worried about his always and forever best friend.

“So if something’s bothering me, I’ll-I’ll tell you. And vice versa! I expect you—Or, I’d like you to come to me when you need to talk.” Jeremy’s eyes were wide open and completely sincere. “I’m done being selfish, seriously.”

“You weren’t—”

“I was, Michael, I was. And you were just too selfless to tell me. But that’s over now, I promise. I’m going to be there for you, no matter what, like a best friend should. Even if it’s hard. And I won’t lie, I’m-I’m sad, Jesus, it hurts a lot.”

Michael winced but Jeremy continued, “And it might be a little while before I-Y’know, have a group hang out with you and Jake.”

He nodded again. That was understandable.

“But I’m still gonna be there.”

Michael found himself hurriedly swiping at his eyes as tears—of gratitude, of joy, and maybe just a little sadness—welled up in his eyes.

“Why would you—If it’s making you sad, why would you still do that, Jeremy?”

But Jeremy only stared in wonder, as if it were a ridiculous question with a simple answer.

“Because that’s what you did, Michael. And if you can do it, I can be selfless too.”

Now they were both trying not to cry in earnest, especially because they’d have to explain the puffy, red eyes to the people they were going to see in the next thirty minutes.

There was just one thing Jeremy wanted to ask before he had to rush home and get ready for school, which he did as he was about to walk through the front door. “I know what I just said, but I have a question. Last time, I promise, just for one thing, can I be selfish?”

Michael had no idea what he was talking about, but he nodded anyway, because if one thing had come out of all of this, it was that he trusted Jeremy. In that moment more than ever.

Jeremy rushed forward and in similar fashion to last night, kissed Michael passionately but fast. Then he was stepping back, staring at the boy in front of him for less than five seconds before running out
of the house and down the sidewalk—All the while grinning like the devil.

Those quick seconds had been enough though. Michael felt in that short amount of time the three monumental words they had never actually said to each other but, in more ways than one, had expressed. He felt it and he reciprocated it, maybe in the same way; then again maybe not. But it was there, and both of them knew it.

Needless to say, things between Michael and Jeremy had never been better. So how could he go to him now, and pour out what Jake had done—How Jake had basically said, I know that you chose me, but I don’t want you—How could he say that to the boy he had in turn, not chosen?

That was true selfishness.

So Michael somehow contained it within himself. Still, he couldn’t bear to go to lunch, and sit next to both of them and smile and laugh and pretend everything was okay. He needed to show that he was breaking down inside, even if there was no audience.

It wasn’t like he could tell Jake how he felt. Or Rich for that matter. And did any of the girls even know what had gone on between the four?

No, it seemed there was no one Michael could confide in.

The end of school found him sitting underneath one of the big oak trees planted at the side of a building on a small hill. It was quiet, and warm. A soft breeze was blowing. Michael felt as if time had somehow frozen, and he would—could live forever in this moment.

It lasted until one of the students, who somehow knew where he was, climbed up that small hill and sat next to him with a heavy sigh.

“Hey, Michael.”

“Hey, Rich.”

“How are you doing?”

Standard reply. “I’m fine.”

“Bullshit.”

Michael peeked over at the boy, who was serenely staring ahead, enjoying the scene before him.

“How are you, really?”

“Less than fine.”

“That’s what I thought. Listen, Michael. I know it must have been hard, and it kind of sucks you had to go through it in the first place. You know, the whole choosing thing.”

It was hard, and as such, he wasn’t really in the mood to talk. But Michael figured if anyone had an idea of how he was feeling, it might be Rich. Plus he was only third on the list of people he probably shouldn’t rant to, so. Not that bad.
“-But I gotta say, I’m glad you did it. You stepped up to the plate. Both of them are going to be better because of it.”

Michael could at least hope for that. Jake had seemed absolutely fine, and Jeremy-Jeremy didn’t even know. Again, questions of “What did this mean now?” flew through his mind. He couldn’t really ask Jeremy to be with him, as if he were sloppy seconds.

Truthfully, Michael had no idea what he was going to do later.

Right now, he was just going to sit underneath that tree and breathe in the fresh air.

“Yes, I’m glad for that too.” Michael muttered. “I-um, It sounds stupid actually…” He began, somewhat talking to himself.

Rich responded anyway, “What sounds stupid?”

“It’s just that, I was so caught up in who to choose and what would happen to who I didn’t, I guess I never really considered the one I chose could say no.”

Suddenly, Rich took the time to look at him. Not just look, but stare, really.

“What did you say?”

Alarmed by his tone, Michael stared right back. “You know, Jake-Well, I don’t want to say broke up, but it’s fitting enough. Jake broke up with me.”

“No.”

“No, he didn’t. Jake didn’t break up with you. You chose Jeremy.”

Nervous laughter erupted from Michael instead of any other suitable reaction, such a gasp, or a wide-eyed look. “No.” He said firmly, “I chose Jake and that-It wasn’t the right choice, I guess, because he said he didn’t want to be together.”

“This is very important, Michael. What did he say exactly?”

He didn’t have to think about it long. It was unwillingly engraved in his memory.

“I stopped him outside of lunch, to tell him that I wanted to—you know, be with him.”

“Right. I saw you guys there.”

“And before I could start he said that he didn’t want me going into it. We were done and both of us knew it.” Involuntarily Michael shuddered at how detached he sounded simply speaking the words, and how it didn’t even compare to the way Jake had delivered them.

“So you see?” He continued, “I did choose Jake, but he didn’t choose me-”

“Oh my god.”
“What?”

“Oh. My. God. Why am I the smartest one in this group?”

“What are you-”

“No, seriously. Why am I the smartest one? Why are all of you too stupid to understand that you fucking-You know what, not the right time.” Rich jumped up from the spot he was sitting. He reached a hand out to Michael who uncertainly took it and was quickly pulled up. “Just keep in mind that you are all idiots and Jake didn’t break up with you.”

“Uh, yes he did-”

“No, Michael. No, he did not. He thought you were breaking up with him and he didn’t want to go through all of that so he was trying to cut it short-”

Rich’s words all jumbled together in Michael’s mind as what the boy was trying to say was revealed to him.

“Jesus Christ,” He breathed, interrupting Rich mid-spiel. “We really are idiots, aren’t we?”

Rich grinned. “Hell yeah you are.” He pointed down the hill where a certain desolate looking Jake Dillinger was walking out of the school and towards his car. “Now go get your mans.”

Michael barely registered the sharp but supportive clap on the back before he was flying down the hill, thoughts running through his mind just as fast. His legs pumped consistently all the way down- and hey, maybe he could be in sports-until he reached the school courtyard and could just barely see Jake’s bobbing blond head in the crowd.

“JAKE!” He yelled loudly through panting breaths, both of which immediately drew the attention of those around him. In that moment it was hard to care however, and he found himself shouting the name one more time before the sound reached its target.

With confused eyes Jake turned around, and Michael felt a pounding in his chest that didn’t have to do with his rapidly beating heart when the confusion morphed into hurt. He didn’t take any steps to avoid Michael, but even the students surrounding them would have been able to tell that Jake didn’t want to look at him-Much less have a heart-to-heart.

Michael pressed forward anyway, managing to stop himself just before plowing into the boy. “Jake,” He breathed out panting, hoping everything that he needed to say could be conveyed in that one word.

“Do you need something, Michael?”

Obviously it did not get across. Jake’s tone was polite-And sounded like he was barely keeping it together. Before Michael’s heart could break he remembered what he was here to do.

“Yes, I really do need something.”

“And what is that?”

“I need...I need you to stop being a gigantic idiot.” Michael remarked, closing the distance between them.
Michael felt Jake’s surprised gasp between his lips but he wasn’t pushed away. Only when they broke apart for air, both ignoring the wide eyed stares and excited whispering that immediately burst from the students present.

“Michael, what the f-I thought you-” A painful look glazed over his eyes, “You and Jeremy-”

“It was you, Jake. Jesus Christ, I talked to Jeremy and we’re friends, we’re best friends but I-It was you, I chose you. I choose you.”

Jake didn’t comprehend it immediately.

“You...choose me?”

Michael smiled up at the boy, trying to make him understand. “I choose you.”

Then they were kissing again, and Michael felt an explosion deep in his chest. It was that gut-feeling, that resonating emotion that was like a hole being filled, his soul becoming whole, that had all doubts of the choice stopping in their tracks.

Then they were kissing again, and Jake felt the overwhelming realization that he was wanted, that he was chosen. That he wanted and chose this boy right back. That now, he was the official boyfriend of Michael Mell.

Kids around them had started cheering, and in any other situation Michael would have been more red with every passing second. It was impossible for him to pay any mind to them though, impossible for him to focus on anyone that wasn’t Jake Dillinger.

He had been wrong in his thinking before. This was the moment he wanted to live forever in. The moment where there was no more confusion, distress, pain, sadness or anything else of the sort.

It was just them and a kiss.

Off to the side, right in the midst of the cheering throng of students, stood two boys.

They were watching the joyous scene in front of them, just like everybody else. And they were happy, because who wouldn’t be satisfied knowing that their best friend was finally happy?

Laced in between that happiness was a haunting feeling that one of the boys, Jeremy Heere, had barely experienced. He knew that come nighttime, he’d desperately think up all the different things he could have done that would have led to a different result or tearfully curse everything wrong he had done. For the moment however, he tried not to let it eat at him.

Next to him, Richard Goranski sent him an understanding nudge, a gesture that said, This is how it is buddy. But seeing their smiles, it’s kinda worth it, right?
Jeremy gently nudged him back and fought to register only the happiness.

The embracing boys in front of them broke away from each other, but their eyes were shining. Immediately, they grasped each other’s hands like lifelines, only then facing the crowd with sheepish grins.

Soon enough their four gazes met. Michael and Jake waved. Rich and Jeremy waved back.

Jeremy felt a smile struggle, before finally winning over and settling on his face as he watched. It was a bittersweet one, but still present.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the exact same smile on Jake’s best friend.

“So,” he mused quietly and slowly, like he was testing out the words. No one but Rich would ever hear this.

“So this is what it’s like to be selfless.”

Chapter End Notes

Lord Almighty.
That’s the end, folks. (I know some of you noticed the 18 chapters, but that’s changed and the chances for an epilogue are very slim.)

I want to thank every single person who even clicked on this fic, and was probably like, "jake and michael what the fuck" but gave it a try anyway, and especially those who kept with this angst-ridden story. I’ve never completed a story this long and it was undoubtedly due to the beyond amazing, incredibly nice and loving comments that blessed every single one of these chapters. All of y’all have my love and I hope this final chapter satisfied.

When I wrote my first BMC fic, there were exactly 4 pages of fanfiction for the entire fandom and the growth has been pretty insane, and I'm really glad I could share my ideas and writing with peeps as considerate and beautiful as you guys. I want to generically become a writer (validation pROBLEMS) so you guys should know how each one of your words desperately helped me. This fic marks the end of my fanfiction writing days (Or so I think, I could come back a week later and be like lmao y’all thought the trash was taken out u were wrong) so for the final time, thank you so much for (I'm just very sentimental right now, blame Sam Smith) I'M GOING TO STOP BEFORE THIS BECOMES A PAGE AND A HALF,

Did I mention my thanks?
I think I did.

~Till next time
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!