sophomore year
by orphan_account

Summary

Summer had been awful for Jeremy Heere.

For a long two months, he and his best friend Michael weren't allowed to hang out.

Now it's the first day of sophomore year.

And Jeremy can't believe it, but he's actually excited to go back to school.

Notes

series start woo!!
promise somewhat of consistent updates!

See the end of the work for more notes
Today was the first day of Sophomore year.

And Jeremy Heere was excited.

Why? Well, because he hasn't seen his best and only friend all summer.

For the entire two and a half months, Michael had been occupied with a very predictable divorce between his parents, and then, as a result, two three-week long trips to both their families in different parts of the Philippines.

Two drawling, 18h flights, followed by almost an entire month with different branches of his extended family, including his cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, somehow his great grandparents (who he thought were dead), and their family friends.

And while he could bring his gaming console (and he did, just in case); the Wifi there was always horrible, the 12h time difference was limiting, the Philippines didn't have many servers, Michael had strict grandparents, and depraved cousins, who always wanted attention.

It made for occasional periods, typically during night where they could text each other, but nothing much else.

Long-distance calls were especially not allowed, because that costed money, and besides, Michael had a big problem with waking up early, so he was one who stayed late hours to talk to Jeremy, who would be a day behind him, which would mean noise past 9pm. His family was especially not going to like that.

To occupy himself during the Summer, Jeremy went to go visit his grandparents for weeks at a time, played with his baby cousins (who, for some reason, were able to speak more German than he ever could, and he took two full courses of it in middle-school!), and helped his dad move furniture from his office.

There was still tension between he and his father, and he didn't really talk to him at all anymore. Everything about him annoyed Jeremy.

Needless to say, days were long, slow, painful even. Most times he sat in bed, trying to nap during times when Michael was asleep, and waited for him to text, waiting for some, muffled vibrato under his covers from his undead phone.

He hardly ate either, losing seven more pounds off his already lanky frame over the months.

By the time Michael got home, three days before the first day of school, he was jet-lagged (which Jeremy would find out to be a very real thing; it was like Michael was on a completely different schedule), sick, and tired constantly.

So neither called each other while Michael recovered, no one came over, nothing. Just weird, three-in-the-morning texts from Michael who somehow, just woke up.
Jeremy actually looked forward to the first day of school. Summer without Michael Mell had been so slow and awful that Jeremy craved his interaction again.

Around eight in the morning, Jeremy Heere walked past the front gate of Middleborough High.

Even if his dad had been driving him since the end of freshman year, the feeling of melancholic loss as he unhooked the front door and just walked out silently from the car recurred.

He missed his mom, a lot. She left for Arizona during the divorce.

Besides that though, his hands felt clammy, his feet paced anxiously, and the pit in his stomach was gaping.

He looked awkward and confused through the way his feet bent on the concrete stairwell up to the doors— as if every step was way too carefully planned.

This, for him was a normal school morning, though it being the first day from summer, was a little more amplified.

On the little platform outside, he could catch in his eye shot some delinquent seniors looming against the wall beside the door, and sitting haphazardly on the thick, but elongated slate banister at either side of the stairs.

They were tall, and had cigarettes in their mouths, with faint smoke plumes rising up into the grey-blue sky softly.

Jeremy cowered a little, eschewing his gaze towards the too-fluorescent-of-lights (that over the course of last year, made him tear up on several occasions) for refuge.

Just looking at the seniors made his throat go stiff and clog up. He couldn't lie and say they weren't intimidating: they were physically built taller and wider, they probably broke the law on a daily basis, and eyed him down like hungry hawks when he passed.

And he couldn't help the indignancy boil in his chest when he saw Cooler sophomores, like Dustin Kropp and Chloe Valentine, saunter past the doors with straight, solemn faces, tethered to reality and basking in it.

He tried to ignore the resentful feeling, any feeling, and looked down at a yellow printed slip of paper.

Breathe, he thought, and through counting his pacing footsteps, he calmed himself two notches down. Pull yourself together, Jeremy, you haven’t even been in school for five minutes.

Just get to class, panic attack later.

Jeremy waltzed up to the third floor and scoured for the door to his English class. He really needed him, not just to calm him down, not just to ground him to reality, just to talk to, he just wanted someone he could burst out about the Summer with, or ask questions to, or just rely on.
But, of course, the chances were super unlikely.

He knew how many people went to Middleborough, how many people needed to fit into these classes, it was a stretch to think he had more than two classes with Mell this semester, but hell, did that stop him from hoping.

Of course not. Jeremy was naïve, maybe, to hope, but it was all he had.

At least, even if he couldn't see him, once he got to class he'd be able to sneak his phone covertly onto his lap and text him.

Fifteen minutes late after the bell, the dream of having Michael in his first-period English class had died off during an attendance call.

He ended up crooning himself within the safe refuge of his elbow-pits, and sleepily listened in on the first-day orientation protocol.

Teachers had to give a full-blown, rehearsed introductory speech to the year, to their course, and they also notified their still lethargic students that after the freshman assembly, they'd be called down to the auditorium too, which would probably happen halfway through third until lunch.

Jeremy this year, had seven classes, well, six and a study hall (he was so bored during the summer with Michael being so absent that he managed to complete the online Summer course for German, which he passed with swift ease), and gym happened to be one of them.

Just looking at the schedule, which was tucked in between his arms, made him very nervous.

Because in bold text the sheet read "ACTIVE LIVING AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION". It was his third, or as it was marked on the paper, his "C"-period class.

He shifted uncomfortably, praying that he didn't get one of those iconic movie-star jackass Phys. Ed teachers that would amplify the school's curriculum to their own gym-rat standards.

Jeremy looked down to the little leafs of paper dubbed his "Humiliation Sheets" (created courtesy around finals week of freshman year), which read different interactions that Jeremy was embarrassed by.

Little things, like people not laughing at his joke, weird glances, or when people very obviously gossiped about him.

His portfolio of tallies would probably grow a lot from gym class, but wasn't going to think and panic about that right now. He couldn't.

Jeremy looked up probably only once out of the entire period, quickly learning that his teacher's name was Mr Reyes.

Jeremy's seen him a few times in the halls, and his freshman English teacher mentioned his name last year.

A balding, middle-aged theatre kid, who, within the first fifteen minutes into talking, complained about the incredulously low budget for school theatre twice.

While he wasn't sure, Jeremy probably dozed off sometime during his first class, because his
hearing went numb and he only saw a short window of black, before suddenly hearing the bell sound within what felt like a minute.

He admitted, maybe he wasn't the most attentive student, but hell, he had a little bit of an excuse; he was up all night overthinking the first day ahead of him that he only mustered to fall asleep around 2.

Jeremy forgave himself for sleeping in class, because realistically, it was inevitable.

When he did wake up, the first thing he checked was his phone— blanked.

The message he had sent to Michael at the start of class (which ended up being sent twenty-eight minutes ago) went unread.

Jeremy became more anxious.

The next class he had was History; and, coincidentally, the history department was located in the East Wing, which happened to be the oldest, most neglected part of the school. The scariest part of the school, might Jeremy add, because aside from the occasional class rotations, the hall was renowned as a hang-out for deadbeat seniors and juniors.

Infact, as Jeremy Heere walked down the hallway timidly, he caught the chipped paint on the walls (circa probably sometime during the 70's) in the edges of his painfully watery eyes.

The lockers, too, were dilliapilated; the metal on it was well beyond rusted in the corners and reeked of old gym clothes and cigarette butts.

He tried to look for positives, but there weren't many.

Jeremy's eyes had tears pricking at them, mostly because they were so dry, but also because there was this nervous, resentful slew welt up in his throat.

He tried to blink it away, but they just came back, he held his head low and let one slip, which he immediately swept away with the overhanging sleeve of his cardigan.

The hallway intermissions were probably the roughest and most feared time for him during school (asides probably Gym, but he’ll get to that later), because anyone could quickly trip or bump into him or hit him or whatever—and get away scot-free due to class scheduling and the narrow chaos that is a Middleborough High hallway.

Jeremy sighed; his spirits were kind of killed realizing how unlikely it was for Michael to be in his class. The innocuous spirit he had this morning about 'wanting to go to school' seemed so naïvete now.

It was likely that he wasn't going to see Michael until the lunch hour, and he couldn't even know for sure.

Jeremy cursed the unknown, but, honestly, it was kind of his fault.

He and Michael had thought it was a good idea to make a (now regretted) pact of not sharing their schedules with each other.
Now the nervous boy, whose eyes darted across the hallway floor looking for Michael's favourite pair of sneakers, dreaded having another class without him.

Luckily, he was very swift and cunning about how he craftily dodged the towering upperclassmen in the hall (a skill he learned during freshman year) that he sat down in History before most any other student got there.

The teacher was lying there with his legs kicked up on his desk; appearance-wise, he was very lanky, and had white hair and a short beard.

Other than that, there was an already written out introduction to his course in Old English newspaper-y font that was written on a blackboard with an artistic prowess to the lettering.

Realistically, he was probably an art teacher too then, most of the teachers at Middleborough taught multiple subjects, because hey, budget cuts.

For a good two minutes, as he brought out his binder and flipped to a new section between dividers, he had some calm before the storm.

He plugged in one earbud and bounced his foot to one of he and Michael's shared Spotify playlists.

Because he wasn't a liar, Jeremy admitted to himself that he just wanted to remind himself of Michael, but his face still displayed that pink glow of embarrassment under his eyes.

As class started, he still thrummed his fingers along the edge of his desk to an early 2000’s song, while he halfly tuned into Mr Calum's own take of first-day introduction.

Jeremy's disappointment vented out of him through a soft sigh, and his hand reached up to his tilted chin.

His teacher got interrupted multitudes of times by a snarky group of popular-ish boys who mumbled snide remarks, or blatantly started talking to each other aloud while ignoring the class.

Mr Calum proved to be pretty sensitive and easily frustrated, and he responded to any provoking irrelevant comment or disruption, trying to hush it.

Which, ended up being counterintuitive, because in trying to quiet the nonsensical remarks, it only fed the dunces.

Jeremy tuned it out, the lecture was essentially lost at this point. It devolved into pointless, argumentative discussion, kindled by kids who Jeremy didn't know the names of.

However the chatter quieted when the door opened about five minutes late for class.

The only reason Jeremy would know that is by how concerned and affronted his teacher looked when (as Jeremy also averted his eyes to the door to see) Michael shuffled saliently into their class.

While Mr Calum groaned and some students snickered as he shrugged past them, Jeremy's heart fluttered.

The anxiety that had fused itself in Jeremy's throat earlier was a distant memory.

"Hey Jer, sorry I'm late. Slept in." said some voice.

Though, with that, Jeremy's small predisposed giddiness dissipated, and was quickly replaced with distorted shock, finally piecing together that voice and Michael's presence. As Michael took a seat
beside Jeremy and shuffled through his bag, he realized.

Michael had changed a whole lot during the Summer.

He couldn't help but blush and feel this weird, stuffy feeling in his throat. Maybe it was anxiety—and it probably was, knowing him. But Michael Mell seemed to have hit his peak of puberty over the Summer, and well, damn, it's treated him well.

For a few moments, Jeremy couldn't feel the nervousness about an encroaching gym class, or his fear of the hallways, or the uncomfortable itch underneath his denim-clad thigh, he felt instead a soft, confusing fuzziness.

His heart was beating faster, he noticed, but it wasn't the awful, panicked beating that he was so typical to.

Jeremy could only focus on Michael Mell right now.

Which was weird, but kind of comforting.

He started picking up things as he looked at Michael through a glassy trance.

For starters, he remembered how Michael looked standing in the doorway just a few moments ago, and how he was so much taller now.

During middle-school and freshman year, he and Jeremy used to battle it out between who was taller—and generally their silly competition was very close, being half-inch difference in height.

Now, Michael looked three, to four, to even five fucking inches taller.

And if he wasn't going to lie, it kind of made Jeremy feel awkward, or something, he didn't know what yet. He shifted in his seat.

Then Jeremy noticed how different Michael's face changed, like as if all the features that were weaker and less discernible were accentuated and strong.

His face seemed less chubby, more cut and defined than before.

His cheek tips still buffed out when he smiled, and by the way, his smile was beautifully crafted, and it just reminded him of Michael, Michael, Michael, and some abiding happiness flushed through Jeremy.

After he grinned at Jeremy though, he brought out some weird, blackwood pencil and swiped it across some randomly-flipped-to sheet of paper in his binder, looking up at Mr Calum.

Jeremy looked down at his body when Michael looked away, and he noticed that his figure seemed more.. man-ish?

Jeremy couldn't think of any other word to describe it, like somewhat of that idealized upside-down triangle shape that every guy wanted, though to be fair, he was clothed in a sweatshirt. Jeremy wondered how he looked without it, like, just shirtless—but wouldn't admit that, that sounded gay.

Nevermind that.

Michael had obviously changed a lot in the little things too, like how his hair was a little more grown out, fitting his face; and was gelled upwards, with strands poking out from different corners along the wave (a previous problem for Michael was how his hair was too short for his larger face,
which looked disproportionate afore).

Jeremy wouldn't say it out loud, but Michael looked incredibly handsome. Some internal dialogue told him not to think about that, but in his throat it was like a hundred cotton rounds has been puffed out and were subsequently, shoved down it.

Like he wasn't allowed to breathe or talk, just admire, and yeah, maybe he didn’t know how to feel about this new Michael.

Maybe even a little insignificant? But still, that feeling was minor, and overwhelmed by a joyful whim.

There still was an uneasiness set because of two opposing sides arguing in his chest, but with one sly brush of Michael's arm across his shoulder blades, he was reminded about how ‘touchy’ Michael was, and any other thought malfunctioned.

A painful spark lit in his chest, winning a pyrrhic victory against its opposition, and a slew of more cotton choked him.

He elicted a noise that sounded like a stifled whine. His body winced upright at first, but slouched back down.

"You okay?"

Oh. Hello.

Jeremy noticed Michael looking at him, suddenly very close, and his own eyes grazed down and across his chest, to the tan-skinned hand curled not far from his pale neck. Something about it grounded him to reality.

Answer him.

A nod. "Yeah man, of course."

In reality, he was silently reliving the sensation of Michael's warm breath against his bare clavicle.

Panic later. He told himself.

Michael relaxed, and smiled. The white-out headset around his neck looked new and unscathed. Jeremy surmised his grandparents got it for him when he went to the Philippines. There, his family was considerably affluent.

"New headphones?" Jeremy asked, at this point everyone else in the room was talking.

Mr Calum was essentially dueling it out about some historic misconception with a kid named Ian, who was playing dumb (hopefully), and arrogantly proposing that the Greeks colonized Britain.

He nodded. "Mhm. Gotta love lola and lolo."

Jeremy breathed out a chortle. "Knew it, also, who're you livin' with now-a-days?"

Of course, with an awkward question, comes an awkward delivery. It was divorce, after all.

Jeremy's voice lowered to a whisper for his latter half of the sentence, but Michael didn't move a tone at all. Like as if there was pride in his voice.
Today, he was really confident.

Jeremy would be too if he looked like Michael—was that weird to think?

"Mom and dad switch every other week. Kinda awkward 'cause dad’s livin' in an apartment for a little while he finds a house. But it's cool, I get the couch." Michael confided, and Jeremy shook his head again in silent response.

He was always kind of secretive about his own situation with his parents, Michael just assumed it still bothered him, and that he was sensitive talking about it.

Obviously, Jeremy also didn't want to be that awkward kid who brings up this traumatic home life in conversation, so Michael occasionally asked about the details he did know.

It's the only point where Michael lowers his voice in conversation. He cowered closer to Jeremy, into his ear— which, makes Jeremy shutter, but Michael doesn't question that.

"Have you uh-uhm, heard from her?" he asked.

Judging by how Jeremy flinched away from Michael, his thoughts shroud with panic, because maybe he asked the wrong question at the wrong time and they were in school of course it was weird and he should've remembered that Jeremy doesn't like mentioning his parents, like ever, and he doesn't even know the story either way so like why is he even aski—

"Uh, nah man. I'll talk more about it later but mm, long story short, I haven't 'n dad haven't heard from her at all." Jeremy explained calmly. "Sorry. Still uh, apprehensive about it all."

Michael nodded reassuringly, though Jeremy could tell that he was still dying for knowledge.

"Don't worry about it man. I don't judge."

He punched him in the arm playfully, but the impact ended up hurting a little. So Jeremy chuckled awkwardly, flitted his eyes away and changed the subject.

Late into history, Jeremy leaned onto Michael's desk and realized that they shared gym through a white printout of his schedule splayed out on his desk.

Which— albeit he had to set aside the idea that Michael's new physique was probably way more athletic than Jeremy was— comforted him, because a lot of gym activities required pairs, and Michael was reliable for that.

Though, it also reminded him that he had gym. So hello again: unwelcomed, recurring anxiety in his stomach.

Luckily, gym class had just been a very brief introduction before the assembly, provided by a kind-faced, bald teacher with a slim, but toned build. He wore a tight grey gym shirt and had discernably hazel eyes.

Okay, not a body builder, great. Jeremy thought on a purple slab on the bleachers in the school gymnasium. So it won't be required to bench 90. Cool.

That anxiety was a little more minute, but nonetheless, present. Michael, who sat beside him,
noticed his shaking at the initial start of the class.

His arm snuck around his back towards the small of Jeremy's waist, but stopped halfway through to press circles into his shirt.

Jeremy was glad to be sitting in the back row. Though Michael's done this before and Jeremy was comfortable with it, they already heard gay jokes every other day, just by hanging out.

And well, physical contact wasn't going to help.

Off-topic, but Jeremy couldn't deny his quickening heart-rate when people touched him.

It didn't matter how close they were, he always was hesitant in breaking a touch barrier; but, it was excusable for Michael— he's always been super feely their entire lives, and it's become kind of relaxing. His breath though, still choked him.

The rows in front of them were full of only boys. Apparently that's how high school operated—segragated by gender, and probably for the better.

Regardless, Michael and Jeremy only knew the names of about half the students in their class, and have only spoken to like, three of them.

There was the recognizable face of Jake Dillinger, a pretty quiet, but sporty kid who made the junior football team last year. He was one of the only three freshman on the team.

Jeremy admired his social status, he hung around juniors and was an only child. No older sibling that introduced him!

Typically, it was either that, or kids would do very weird things to get that sliver of recognition from the upperclassmen.

Jake never did and still kept his popularity consistently high, to Jeremy's knowledge.

Besides that, other faces he sort of knew (but not really) were Martin Xiang, Nico Trace, Ollie Parker, and a guy named Ben that Jeremy that didn't know the surname of.

He wished he paid attention during attendance, but frankly, hearing 23 laden boys drawl (in extremely similar voices, Jeremy might add) the word "here" in response to their names was hard to keep track of either way.

Mr Reyes ended up being right. Sometime into the period— Jeremy wouldn't know when because he smuggled in his earbuds and got lost nodding his head with Michael to some music— a loud fumbling called over the P.A. system. A low, monotone voice told for all grade ten classes to make their way to the auditorium followed it.

"So I heard this thing the other day," Michael started, as the class shifted down off the bleachers. He pocketed his phone. "like, did you know kerplunking is a real word? Like it's in the dictionary."

Jeremy nodded his head, and chuckled, "Well, what does it mean?" he asked. Classic Michael told Jeremy unusual facts all the time.

He excitedly looked to Jeremy, like telling him useless information was his life-form, and burst out the definition. Meanwhile, they walked the hall as a throng of teenage boys, lead by their gym teacher, the pack’s alpha.
They ended up sitting beside each other in the assemblage of sophomores.

Up, alone in the top row, whispering snarky comments about some announcer lady’s poor commentary over a powerpoint presentation up until lunch.

By the end of the day, Jeremy Heere was wiped. Anxiety was exhaustive, but Michael, music, and notebook-bound doodles had been there as often as they could to calm him down and get him through the day.

It was hard to admit, but over the Summer months, he hadn't realized how much he missed Michael's comforting touch of his arm slung around Jeremy's neck, or how he would offer his headset to tune out sound when Jeremy was getting too sensitive to it, or how he would miss half of his last period class on a 'bathroom break' to chill out with Jeremy in the atrium.

Michael, the different but not too different Michael Mell.

When Jeremy got home, he flunked starfish into his bed.

He was exasperated, his insides warm with this persistent, fuzzy feeling.

He slunk himself into the first layer of sheets on his bed, and curled up beside a pillow.

Ready to nap, because he was so utterly oversensitized to where there was a painful, reverberating hum in his ears that he was trying to ignore.

Before his lidded eyes could drowse him into blackness though, he checked his abuzz phone. Half-awake, his body shook lightly with a glowing whim as he read:

"michael mellon ; hey, wanna go to the mall afterschool on friday? Today at 3:14"

His body was nodding lightly to some invisible thrumming.

Maybe it was some anxiety-spurn tiredness.

Though a different, happier feeling was beating over that in his chest.

He smiled somehow, face creasing, remembering how he and Michael shared second, third, and fifth together. What luck.

Jeremy replied.

"jeremy deere ; Yeah, I'll check it with my dad after this well deserved nap :). Today at 3:14"
Now, at the end of the day, he already’s made plans with his best friend to make-up for their lost time during the Summer.

Luckily enough also, today was a day his dad worked overtime (as mentioned by a note on the dining table Jeremy hadn’t noticed this morning). So he got to pick what he ate tonight.

He smiled, because in the moment, he forgot about all the trauma from freshman year. He forgot about how lonely he’d been during the Summer. He forgot about the drawling day at school. He forgot about gym, about popularity.

And he went to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

i hoped you enjoyed this!

the only tagalog in this fic is lola and lolo, which (if i’m correct, which i’m probably not) is grandmother and grandfather

kudos and comments are always appreciated <3!
On Friday afterschool, Michael and Jeremy took a west-bound bus to the mall.

The week up until then had been calmer. Routine was still a work in progress, but if there was anything to salvage as 'good' from this week, it's that they were bullied significantly less than freshman year.

Maybe last year’s seniors were just the biggest dicks that have ever attended Middleborough, or maybe it was because they were older, and freshman were simply the easiest targets.

Whatever it was, Jeremy was a little happier that the abuse had lightened up a bit.

That wasn’t to say that he still wasn’t verbally thrashed when he walked the hallways alone, or that there still weren’t snickers or gossip about him, justifying his unabating anxiety, but tried to focus on the positives, like Michael did.

The worst part about the week was definitely gym class, bullying aside.

Ten minute warm-ups every other day made Jeremy’s limbs feel weak, sore, and painful to move, which was physically exhausting to manage.

Even just climbing up on the short steps into the bus made his hamstrings cry out in pain.

He collapsed on the seat and alleviated his burning shoulders from his backpack. Fucking push-ups, Jeremy's worst nightmare.

Michael wasn’t the best either, but he definitely didn’t have it worse than Jeremy.

Though he did, by the end of the week, groan painfully everytime he had to stand up. Jeremy didn't think he liked the sound.

But, at least now they were done with school for a few days, so they can get some good sleep in.

At least they could go eat at some shitty restaurant in the mall’s food-court, or window-shop skater hoodies outside the Vans store.

And in their book, that was something to celebrate.

For the bus ride, the two of them talked about the day — and by 'day', that meant whatever happened after lunch, since they talked about whatever happened in the morning at lunch.

Their discussion was lazy, but not curt; simple, but comfortable, because now it was the weekend,
and at least they didn't have to worry about school until Monday.

Well, maybe a little bit.

"So my god damned uhh, audacious-ass science teacher, she fuckin'! She gave us an assignment already? Who does that?" said Michael.

He sat relaxed against the bus window, melted into the seat while lending his shoulder to Jeremy.

His face was irritable, though he blew off the façade to the low hum of music seconds after.

Quiet enough to hear Jeremy, but he wasn't talking much anyway, so it didn't really matter.

Instead, the boy shrugged in response.

"I'm guessing you already don't like her." Jeremy chuckled. "Obviously."

Though it might be a little childish, his hands were currently pressing away on a DS he's had since sixth grade.

Jeremy found it rummaging through his closet on Wednesday, and he's been playing his old games ever since. Middle-school throwbacks, a sweet sense of nostalgia, and the tingly feeling in his chest as he leaned his head on Michael's collar.

The bus ride was short, but concise enough for Michael to ramble a little about his science assignment: a short essay dedicated to his knowledge on ecology and how wildlife ecosystems work. It didn't sound that difficult a topic.

"But it's so tedious! Like, we learn about ecosystems every year, Jeremy. Do I really have to compile a list of every regurgitated concept that has been embedded so deeply into my mind just so she can smack a grade on it that won't even matter by the end of the semester?" he dragged.

Jeremy giggled a little, because Michael only used bigger words like 'embedded' and 'regurgitated', or empathized his syllables, when he got frustrated.

Jeremy sighed breathily, significantly less stressed than when he had gotten out of school just thirteen minutes ago.

Of course, there was always that tenacious sense of anxiety encroaching in his chest, especially in public places, but he's accustomed to it.

Right now, he could subside and ignore it, because he was calm, peaceful, with his head tilted onto Michael's seat.

He could hear, with his ear so close to Michael's headphones, the low vibrato from his headphones. Somehow, it cancelled out all the noise traffic behind them, and there was something serene about that.

Though when the bus came to a stop, he was rudely reminded of the burn in his muscles when he stood up, and the peace ended.

Jeremy grunted, having seemingly forgotten the ache that coiled through his joints.

"F-fuck." wheezed Jeremy, almost collapsing into his seat again, but he grasped the bar on the bus' ceiling and bared through it.
Michael had a similarly troubling time, and groaned like a dad forced off his chesterfield.

"You alright buddy?" Michael asked, almost sarcastically. His smug grin confirmed that.

Jeremy dry-laughed, mostly because there was little breath in his lungs to be spared. "How many times have you asked me that this week?"

They traversed through the bus aisle, both their ribs aching. "I dunno. I just worry about you, bro." Michael said quietly, patting Jeremy lightly on the back. "And I have a right to be, too, you've been acting hella weird lately."

The mall, in front of them, was pretty small. It wasn't their city mall, just a one-story complex comprised of mostly skater apparel shops, bookstores, one tux depot and fast-food restaurants.

There were also tables set up in the hall with unconventional artists priding themselves around paintings tagged at 29$ each, or vegan bath supplies stop-and-shop boutiques celebrating animal cruelty awareness, or flimsy phone-case booths, but that was expected. It was more of a flea market.

"I have not. You haven't seen me all summer, I'm only anxious at school."

Jeremy knew what Michael meant. He just didn't want to admit to it. He's been acting abnormally ever since the first day of school, but it's always been when he's around Michael. Jeremy just figured that he was still learning how to get back into the rhythm of things. It's been an entire summer with no Michael, of course Jeremy isn't completely comfortable yet.

Michael half frowned, forcing himself to just roll with Jeremy's probable-lie for now, just so he wouldn't make their conversation awkward.

Hell, other people surrounded them, and he wasn't gonna be the one who ruined today for Jeremy.

But truthfully, he was very worried about Jeremy.

He'd been blanking out a lot in conversation, plugging in his earbuds way more, and generally had been needing a lot more reinforcement because of his for-some-reason-now-very-high anxiety. Michael figured it was the anxiety, but hell, it could be hundreds of things. Maybe he just had something on his mind all the time or maybe he just changed a little over the summer, but still.

He seemed so insecure. Michael tried to sum it up to the Summer having been rough for him—maybe his self-worth dropped with constantly being alone and bored.

Michael also couldn't help feeling incredibly guilty for leaving him alone and bored, even if it wasn't by his choice.

*I'll bring it up later.* Michael thought, but realistically he'd probably never revisit the idea of asking Jeremy about it.

He was so nervous and uncomfortable when Michael brought up his own Summer activities. He'd probably hate it if Michael tried to force answers out of him.

"Still gonna worry, but okay, Jer." Michael softly spoke, realizing he should probably drop the topic now.

Jeremy packed his little blue DS in his backpack's front pocket before turning back to Michael.
Maybe it was just an 'at school' thing. Maybe Michael didn't have enough data to make a compelling argument. Maybe he was just making something out of nothing.

Either way, school was scary, especially after last year's bullying saga that probably scarred Jeremy. Besides, they haven't even hung out outside of school—other than now—and, maybe Jeremy was right. He was fine. Michael was fine too, then.

"Alright, just know, I'm good. And I told you not to call me Jer!" he enthusiastically added.

His eyes, now, appeared lit with some giddiness. Michael was pretty sure he was just trying to convince himself to be happier, but shrugged along with the act.

"Or what? It's cute." Michael replied smugly, as he held the door for Jeremy, then waltzed in himself.

Jeremy couldn't help but blush, and Michael definitely noticed. He squealed in offense, and smacked Michael's shoulder. "If you continue, I'm gonna start calling you—you uh Micah, or something!"

Jeremy honestly didn't care if Michael called him Jer or not. It was just something he could make a scene over and jokingly play along.

Plus he's kind of always wanted to call Michael 'Micah', just to see how he'd react and possibly-if-he-could-call-him-it-again-'cause-Jeremy-kind-of-liked-it.

But it was also kind of funny, because when they were younger, Michael's mom called him it all the time. He was justified.

Michael's chuckle was kind of wholesome and full, if Jeremy could articulate the noise in any one adjective. Genuine, maybe.

Whatever it was, it made Jeremy glow with some renewed type of glee hearing it. It's that same, weird feeling in his chest—why was his pulse racing? "Am I supposed to take offense to that? It's even cuter."

Jeremy, albeit wheezing for the breath stolen from his lungs, feigned some sort of frustration, and huffed, kicking his foot against the carpet. "Fine, you win. Happy?"

He tried to fight the burn in his cheeks, and that happy twist in his stomach, but to no avail.

In the distance, he saw two women—a mother and a daughter, he surmised—sit on the ledge of the water fountain, and giggle in his direction.

The elder mouthed something to her junior, and the junior simply laughed hysterically.

He couldn't help the fact that other people looking at him so intently made him nervous, but some sickness overturned in the pit of his stomach.

Jeremy wondered what she'd said. Pitifully, he turned his eyes back to Michael with an embarrassed, nervous expression, who was, in contrast, still grinning.

Michael nodded, and suddenly, his hand was firmly on Jeremy's back. "Very happy, Jer." he mocked. "Anyway, what'cha wanna check out first?"

Even if that brief interaction had sort of freaked Jeremy out, he tried forgetting about it, because
the fake-it-til-you-make-it improv between he and Michael had really worked out.

The mood between them notably picked up, so he walled off the stupid, subconscious voice in his head that made volatile jabs at him.

He walled off the idea that the girl probably thought Michael and him were gay.

It didn't matter what she thought, it didn't matter, because Jeremy knew that in fact, Michael and him were not gay, and that mattered a lot more. He lived with the flush on his cheeks and weakly held his head high.

Admittedly though, Jeremy was flushed for other reasons too—specifically, from their little dialogue, even if it'd just been filler space of conversation.

Hearing Michael call anything cute was different. Probably the shock factor was what stumbled him so much.

Yeah, that.

Back on topic, Jeremy's eyes darted to either side of the elongated storefronts as they stood in the middle of a nearly empty mall courtyard.

Out of all the shops listed at his discretion, the dollar store was making eyes at him above the rest. So, Jeremy pointed to it.

"Useless school supplies?" he suggested wistfully.

Michael laughed, then shrugged. "Well, I actually would like to buy Ona some chocolate to shut her up. I'm baby-sitting her Sunday."

Ona was Michael's niece. She was seven or eight years old and probably the most adorable first-grader Jeremy's ever seen.

Though despite her cherub outside, Ona made Michael—no, Micah's life a living hell.

Jeremy's only interacted with her once; last year when he was at Michael's house, he got a 'Surprise, you're baby-sitting our daughter tonight because we want to bang!' text from the cousins he called 'aunt' and 'uncle'.

So they ended up making muffins from some pre-made mix Michael's mother bought at the supermarket. They were 'hella' bland, so they ended up putting chocolate chips in the second batch they made.

The only things that could pacify Ona's desire to explore every area she possibly could of his house (and breaking things while she was at it) were cartoons, baking, drawing, or food, especially chocolate or sweets; like any other kid.

She hardly spoke English, but Michael translated for him.

"Stocking up I see?" Jeremy asked, giggling. The aisles were spread with different labels like 'Garden Supplies and Candles' and 'Candles Pt. 2 and DIY'. Michael nodded.

They meandered through the aisles with heads up at the towering bars while scanning their shelves.

There were short muses about whether or not they should buy this 'fake but really real-looking
blank vinyl’ that Michael thought about hanging up in his room, or maybe if they should buy these little wooden lootboxes, pretending like they’d get around to painting and decorating them.

Michael did actually end up buying one, but hardly mentioned it.

Jeremy ended up with a small collection of gel-pens, an agenda, a cyan-stained spritz bottle, some bubble gum, and a bunch of tealights; while Michael bagged the aforementioned box, two probably-not-real-glass glass jars, car air fresheners (he couldn’t drive and didn’t have a car), a stack of card stock, chocolates and other sweets, a silicone, purple spatula, and a baking pan.

"Where next, Micah?" happily drawled Jeremy. They had a system where one person would pick a store, and then the other, changing leads in "every other time" intervals.

Michael shrugged. "You know I’m going to say Spencer's Gifts, right? I haven't checked with my homie in a while."

And it was true, Jeremy did know it was probably going to end up either at Spencer's Gifts, or some other, less-visited vintage-retro gamestop. "Fiiine, and by the way, no one uses 'homie' anymore." Jeremy smiled.

The nostalgic feeling he was craving slew back into Jeremy's chest and made him feel fuzzy, and warm.

There was satisfaction to the secure feeling knowing Michael was still the same way he was before Summer.

He admittedly got scared after seeing Michael's appearance change so much, and kind of had been on edge about whether or not he was the 'same Michael'— as silly as that sounded.

For once Jeremy felt okay with being dragged to Spencer's and waiting besides him as he talked to some shady dude in the back.

The shady dude's name was Eugene, he was apparently some League of Legends guy Michael used to play with.

Jeremy walked out with Michael excitedly looking down at some old Sega Genesis game case.

There wasn't much special about it to Jeremy, hell he wasn't even sure if Michael owned a Genesis, or if he even wanted to play the game.

It'd probably end up in the glass casing Michael pridefully kept in his bedroom containing all the retro games that were 'too vintage' for him to risk damaging.

He shrugged his own shoulder into Jeremy's, too preoccupied with reading the back-of-the-cover text to properly ask. "Pick."

Jeremy chortled. While Michael was distracted, his eyes grazed around the two shopping halls to each his left and right.

He maybe needed some new running shoes, because Jeremy before didn't have Phys Ed. before, and didn't have to worry about the adequate footwear for a class he didn't want to take. "Mmn, I think I have enough for a pair of shoes."

His dad gave him a hefty allowance of 100 dollars that Jeremy was trying to budget. 16 dollars at the Dollar Tree, and 8 at Spencer's Gifts. While Michael had been talking to that Eugene kid,
Jeremy picked out a poster for the new Apocalypse of the Damned game coming out next year.

It was small, but it was something. Jeremy’s always wanted to decorate his room with some more memorabilia, his room felt so impersonal to his interests.

"You sure you'll have enough to eat afterwards too?" asked Michael, and frankly, Jeremy wasn't sure about that.

"Well, they might have a sale! And if they don't then I could just browse for some."

Michael's expression softened as he dropped the game casing into the goodie bag from the Dollar Tree. "I could always buy you dinner too," he offered.

Jeremy chuckled. "Sounds like a date." commented Jeremy, not letting the little nervousness hitched in his throat refrain him from cracking a joke about Michael's poor phrasing.

Unexpectedly, Michael winked, and Jeremy couldn't fight the heat in his face.

Those stupid jokes always made him feel weird, not uncomfortable, but it was similar to when a pretty girl in his grade kept stealing glances at him in the hallway.

Which rarely ever happened, but if it did, then Jeremy reckoned that’s how it would feel.

"Nah, but seriously man, you don't have to do that." Jeremy insisted, on his march to a low-budget shoe supply store. "I could just make something at home later if I get hungry."

Michael chuckled incredulously. "Alright, first off, you've been complaining about being hungry all day, and you don't even know how to make cereal properly. I'm not letting you do that."

Another joke about how Jeremy puts the milk in before his cereal, Michael loved poking at Jeremy with that all the time.

But still, Jeremy could admit that his culinary knowledge didn't go beyond a subpar breakfast menu. "Hey, I can make a fat egg man."

"Mhm, but you'll burn the bottom and end up not eating it, because I know how much you hate burnt food."

How did Michael remember all of these things? He was so prepared to argue Jeremy about Jeremy, and he still cornered his arguments and won.

It was kind of impressive, and it may or may not made Jeremy feel really giddy and special knowing how interested Michael was in hi— no, well-versed? How well Michael knew him.

Jeremy scoffed arrogantly. "The audacity." he said in a pompous tone, holding a still facade with his chin held high— but he broke into an incessant giggle.

"Anyway," Michael started, as Jeremy lead him through the surprisingly heavy doors of the shoe depot store.

Next stop was the mall food court.
Jeremy had actually ended up buying a pair of low-priced running shoes.

They were sixty dollars— because they were a previously used pair, but they were fine. Jeremy didn't care enough about gym class to get those high-fashion, technologically advanced cleats just so he could put them away after the semester and never use them again.

Plus, he was on a budget, and actually wanted to eat, as advised by Michael.

Either way, with taxes, it ended up to be 63$. Really he only had 12$ and some change left, but Michael insisted that if he didn't have enough to eat, he'd tip in.

Which Jeremy was extremely grateful for now, because after the talk with Michael about dinner, he felt more famished than been he had all year.

The fast food shops at the mall weren't going to be extremely expensive, so he was praying he could get some ridiculous value meal and eat as much as possible.

And that's exactly what he did. Michael did end up pitching in three dollars, but after Jeremy claimed he felt 'guilty' because of it, he snagged a few fries and courteously insisted that they were even.

Jeremy faced it, Michael was way too nice to him. And maybe that was just his low self-esteem talking, but he suddenly started feeling very anxious, because he didn't deserve a friend like Michael to do all this for him.

Thoughts started going through his head, and he couldn't help it either.

Anxiety was an encroaching wrestler about to use their final takedown move, anxiety was a bitch, because everything now was gut-wrenching and memories started coming back from earlier that day, earlier that week, that year, his life.

He just started evading looking at Michael and scarfed down whatever he could muster before his anxiety restricted his appetite; like it always did.

And obviously, Michael caught on, because eventually Jeremy started choking down his food instead of happily wolfing it down. A prime indicator.

Michael worriedly, yet quietly, watched Jeremy's Adam apple bob as some curly fries forced it down.

He didn't want to ask if he was okay, hell, he probably seemed so annoying by how much he questioned him about it.

But, he did at least keep a pair of protective eyes on Jeremy.

He was still, and weirdly observant, of how Jeremy's bony hand wrapped around a large cup, and, very shyly, sipped from it. He noticed how he balled up the liquid in his mouth, how he couldn't drink it normally.

That's when Jeremy started profusely coughing with a reddening face, just as if his surface of a calm, and collective, icy layer, broke.

Michael's arm lurched forward and he immediately began patting Jeremy down on his back.

Once he was fine, he timidly thanked Michael with a nod and a mutter, then tried to look and scoot
away again.

He felt awkwardly placed, and covertly began rummaging his hand in his pocket for the earbuds; yearning for that sense of relief since he began noticing all the out-of-place things around him.

But, he couldn't, not before Michael's arm swooped back around, and slid down across his clavicle and shoulders, bringing him a little closer.

"Hey. I know you're hella afraid of confrontation, but please Jeremy, if there's anything you need." Michael said, with a lot more of a sudden, tender tone, and though he anticipated some resistance, or some repulsion, or some fight in the boy, Jeremy just melted into his shoulder with hazy eyelids drooping like curtains in front of his eyes.

Michael noticed how his body was very slightly shaking. Jeremy was restraining tears. "You know you can talk to me about anything, right? I'm always here."

There was some comfort to Michael's concern.

The same concern that had been pent up for the week now, concern that had been displayed through the way Michael let Jeremy write down off the few notes he took himself in their shared classes, displayed through the way he'd slow down during gym warm-up just to jog beside Jeremy instead of going at his own pace— just so he wouldn't feel alone— and how he's been shooting him those accommodating, understanding, and genuine smiles.

Little things that made him happy to have Michael.

There were some underlying warmth creeping underneath the arrogance and bias Jeremy had against expressing emotion.

It made him just want to hug his best friend.

He murmured and patted down his eyelids, assuring himself that he wouldn't cry. And he wouldn't, something about Michael's half-assed, nonchalant embrace just made him feel okay.

"I know, Mikey." Jeremy replied, trying not to sound too soft.

The only moments' worth of juxtaposition was a weird rollercoaster to ride. Perhaps it was inappropriate to their moment, but he reached for a fry and shrugged.

Michael smiled, maybe at Jeremy's raw and genuine tone, like he was taking him seriously, or it was how he could eat again, or maybe it was because Jeremy had just broken the emotional mood. "What happened to Micah?"

Whatever it was, Jeremy couldn't help smile back. "So you like it." he said, matter-of-factly.

Michael didn't nod or shake his head, he just shot Jeremy a feigned, disapproving glare; there was also red on his cheeks, so yes, Michael did like the nickname.

His expression melted away. "But uh, on a more serious note, I hope you're okay— and, well, if you're not, it'll get better."

Michael was truly clueless as to how to comfort Jeremy about this here, in a mall food court. Especially when Jeremy had seemingly freaked out about nothing.

"I worry you're too good a friend for me." Jeremy chuckled, which wasn't really the thing bothering
him, but frankly he wasn't joking.

Everything bothered him, all the time. "I mean. There's more, but not much more that I'm comfortable talking about—" Jeremy's eyes glared either side of the food court.

They blended in with the crowd, but it still felt weird huddled in the midst of it, the faces of those two women flashed through his mind again. He winced. "in a public place."

Michael breathed out like it was some sort of comic relief. "I don't think you can say 'nything like that, Jer. You've been there for me during my roughest times, and you should remember that, 'cause I've been a fuckin' trainwreck." he chuckled.

Jeremy chortled, or at least tried to. The panic was dwindling, but still, admittedly, felt anxious and awkward but that was probably due to the 'I'm very close to my best friend in public and I don't want to give off the wrong impression’ realization. He scooted away from Michael.

"You just want me to admit defeat again?" Jeremy asked, perking up in his seat.

He sighed, yeah, it was the in public thing that was throwing him off, and frankly, the weight of people around him did discomfort him. But he'd be going to be home soon, he wouldn't have to worry about this soon.

Regardless, right now he felt safe, Michael was with him, and even if he wasn't allowed to huddle close and confide in him, the social anxiety sort of subsided.

Because he had someone there understood him and who recognized when he had panic attacks and who hurriedly whisked him away to comfort him.

Which was something to find solace in.

Jeremy sighed on the car ride home.

His dad picked him up, so he didn't have to walk home two blocks from a bus stop.

For once, he was grateful for the silence between them. Of course there were the times where Mr Heere would try and spark some conversation like, ‘How's Michael?’ and ‘Do you have any change left?’, but there was no depth to it.

Jeremy spent the car ride home with his eyes glassily fawning outside the window.

He hoped that his anxiety would clear up soon.

It never normally was this bad, and he could see now why Michael was so concerned over him. Random panic attacks, rambling thoughts, and unnecessary precaution.

But, there were just small things that Jeremy was waiting for reassurances on, small thoughts that he couldn't always triumph over in his head, or little challenges that seemed impassable.

*It will get better*, Jeremy thought. That's what Michael's always told him.
Even when he got home, even as he sat with his knees crossed and a large, thin scrapbook in his arms, he thought about the same adage in the same voice.

A particular photo stood out to him.

Grade four, scrapping his knee after his first bike-ride out of the house with Michael.

The gash hurt, it was bleeding, and all Michael could do was hold his shirt down on Jeremy's scrapped knee to help the blood not spill out across his leg.

Michael knew how much Jeremy went queasy about blood, and as the boy sobbed from the pain, Michael was panicking and repeating the same maxim.

"It'll get better." he whisper-yelled, and frankly now Michael was crying, too.

He was panicking too, uttering nothings out his mouth incessantly, half of which unintelligible and foreign. "ito ay gumagaling," fumbled Michael (or he said something like that), twitchy and stuttering and not even in English. He hated seeing Jeremy in pain. "But Mikey, it hurts, like a lot."

They were on the side of the road, not far from Michael's house.

Every so often, the ten-year old would look up above Jeremy at the street to make sure there weren’t any cars.

Michael hushed Jeremy. "When we get back to my place, mumshie’ll put a bandage on it and it’ll get better."

And that's what they did, after Jeremy, and Michael, calmed down, they walked— well, Jeremy limped— back to the Mell's, where a sympathetic Mrs Mell put a square, tan bandage over the scrape.

She took a photo of the two standing together in the hall when Jeremy had to leave later that day.

And there was the bandage, right over Jeremy's left knee, and both of them had shy smiles, because both of them didn't know how to act in front of a camera.

And Jeremy smiled, when he looked back at this. There were a lot of photos, a lot of ticket stubs, a lot of birthday cards and cute letters, a lot of memories in this one scrapbook.

Jeremy's mom gave it to him a while ago, when he was in sixth grade.

She wanted him to fill it up with family photos after his hypothetical little brother or sister was born, because that's what the Heere's wanted at the time; two children.

They never really got to live that fantasy.

Instead, Mrs Heere would be surprised to see photos of her son and Michael Mell plaster the pages with simplistic captions written in a younger-Jeremy's scrawl. Most shot by the Mell's polaroid.

He never got a baby sister, or a baby brother, and soon he wouldn't have his mom.

But at least he'd always have Michael.

The friend who's smile lit up almost every page.
Whose dorky drawings were scribbled on sticky notes that Jeremy would date and save in the clear folds of the scrapbook, whose shared photographs showed Jeremy different stages of a shared life. He got to see how Michael had changed, how they'd changed.

And suddenly, there were clear, wet, blots cascading down the laminated covering.

Suddenly, Jeremy Heere was crying.

Sobbing, actually, but he wasn't sad, he didn't think so.

He hurriedly closed the book, and tenderly ushered it back in the space below Jeremy's box-spring.

There was this smile creasing on his lips, a quivering, soft smile, but still, none the less, a smile; hidden by a hand halfly cupped over his mouth and on his face.

Jeremy opened his phone up instead, ignoring the tears streamed down his cheeks, and looking at the three unread messages.

"michael mellon ; hey, sorry if i made you feel awkward at the mall today Today at 6:57"

"michael mellon ; i just worry about you sometimes man, and you started freaking out and i got scared, sorry aha. Today at 6:57"

"michael mellon ; anyway, have you seen the new trailer for AofD? dude this shit looks so tight. Today at 6:59"

He couldn't help but feel the smile helplessly widen. His eyes grazed to the keyboard, and his fingers started patting in reply.

Chapter End Notes

i hoped you enjoyed this!

kudos and comments are always appreciated <3!
Saturday morning—well no, correction: it wasn't Saturday morning.

A sleepy Jeremy Heere woke up to his emergency alarms screeching at 1:30. A time he set to wake up on the weekends to assure himself he wouldn't waste the entire day sleeping.

But he woke up extremely fatigued. He forgot what time he fell asleep yesterday night, but he didn't assume it'd been late, and typically on weekends Jeremy woke up around even.

He sighed, deliberating if he wanted to go back to sleep or not, his eyes and muscles definitely screamed yes.

It was Saturday, and there was not much he'd do today anyways.

Probably end up doing the homework that he dreaded but would be too bored not to do, or maybe he'd hang up that poster, or something.

Weekends were great, because he got to do whatever he wanted and there were no responsibility—but there was nothing he wanted to do, there were no responsibility.

Nothing else besides sleep, which was looking to be a pretty ideal option.

Then he dragged his hand through his hair, and that was the deciding factor.

His face crinkled in disgust, it felt oily and brimmed with grease at the roots.

Gross.

Yeah. He needed to shower, now. Jeremy was not going to rot in bed with a thin layer of sweat coating his body (his duvet was slightly too thick) and a mop of hair daubed generously in oil.

Now, he felt disgusting, and he wouldn't be able to sleep either way because of that, so he droned his feet to the ledge of his bed, and forced himself up.

There was the same, but now subtler pang that ached his musculature. He groaned out of pain, but it was easier to bare through today.

His eyes looked out from his bedroom, and athwart the hall was the same white, identical door for the lavatory.

Jeremy quickly grabbed a new pair of boxer-briefs and an ambitiously oversized t-shirt, and
scampered across the hall in his underwear alone.

He thought about going downstairs and getting water, since his throat felt dry and gravelly, but then he realized that his dad probably didn't go to work today, which probably meant he was downstairs, which probably meant father-son confrontation.

Yeah, he didn't need water right now.

Because things had turned rough between Jeremy and his father now.

Daily rides to school were quiet and tense, and trying to converse with one another lead to a problem all in itself.

It typically devolved into a passive-aggressive dialogue that left both Jeremy and Mr Heere frustrated with the other.

Jeremy tried to avoid talking to him most of the time, of course there were the check-ins, some brief tête-à-tête exchanges, most of which were either completely devoid of emotion, or laced with some intervening irritability; and that was fine.

But right now, Jeremy was in no place to deal with the lazy shell of a man he called his father.

Instead, he reeled the shower knob to a position that generally was warm, but not blistering, then set his clothes on the towel rack by the sink, brushed his teeth, and waited for the water to steam.

After he showered, a refreshed Jeremy eyed the stairs from down the hallway testily.

He sighed in defeat, giving up to his own human necessities of water and food.

So, he arrogantly stomped down the wooden flooring, and brushed his hand through his wet hair. The bristles of his hair were frigid, cold, and crisp, moping down his forehead in sad curls.

Jeremy didn't know why simple things like talking to his father had become something that he had to deliberate about to himself.

But, he still climbed down the stairs with no intent that he would be talking to his dad at all. That was the ideal, to just ignore him until he felt good enough to talk again. That was their gig, that was the dynamic between the father-son duo.

Frankly, because of his dad's audacious tendencies and dull humour, Jeremy's otherwise long fuse became short.

There was just something about his father, maybe it was his inability to even dress himself on non-work days (and his half-assed tie tucking otherwise), devolved and lacking work effort, or his already-schlubby body gaining more pounds by the day, but whatever it was, that something always ticked Jeremy off.

And it probably wasn't his dad's fault. It was probably the ruined perspective Jeremy's had of his father that sometimes made him so hard to respect.

Most times, out of fear that he'd say something he'd regret, Jeremy would ignore his dad altogether.
for hours on end, only to briefly murmur to each other at dinner.

It wasn't to say there weren't good days—days where the two could actually hold somewhat of a conversation, they were just rare.

Jeremy was an anxious teenager with the typical lust for rebellion, who also couldn't help but blame his misfortune on his single parent.

A single parent that was surprisingly, and helplessly easy to mock.

But they made do, and Jeremy shrugged it, their relationship and it’s downfall, off. Some days were more passive either ways, some days were tolerant and Jeremy honestly, still loved his father, but there was just always that something there.

It didn't really matter. This wasn't something Jeremy thought about often anyways. He tried to stow these thoughts away, and forget about the days where things were easier just because it made him cry when he did.

He didn't want to admit that he's become so emotionally reclusive and stressed that he can't formulate a well-comprehended discussion with his own father.

They never talked about what happened, never even mentioned it unless it was in the form of curt slews or side-eyed glares. Neither were going to change that, either.

They're both too arrogant.

Jeremy sighed, his fingers twiddling against the smoothed, polished wooden rods that barred the banister, and, looking out onto the den, there his dad was, laying on the sofa in a white tank top, his open housecoat, and under the blanket that covered up to his waist, probably no pants.

He was more silent and tactful than he'd usually be for just getting water and a snack, but he tried to walk gracefully and silently so his father wouldn't notice him.

Oh. Jeremy thought, eyes fixated on the couch, and suddenly relieved. He's asleep.

Some influx of anger panged through his chest. He sharply breathed in.

Of fucking course he is.

Jeremy grumbled and traversed to the fridge, less carefully than when he'd been traipsing around on his tiptoes.

He murmured in defeat, lacking groceries, except for an apple he picked from the backside shelf off the door. He moved to the cupboards and cabinets, finding a granola bar and a pop tart. It'll do.

Jeremy sighed, for a second he paused and observed his dad on the chesterfield, and listened to his obnoxious snoring.

Just above the couch was a collection of photographs in hexagonal framing. Some were blanked, removed, redacted, and they were like that on purpose.

A similar melancholic feeling fell upon him, just like it always did when he left the car for school every morning.

Those were the photos of he and his mother, or his mother and his father, or the three of them smiling at different events or milestones.
It was like their shared, family scrapbook, emblazoned proudly on the walls. Now, all memory of his mother was ripped from them, and sure, maybe it was for the better, but hell, it was still depressing. Her office space was reinvented for his father's, since now, he worked home some days.

Jeremy just walked past the wall in the living room and back up onto the stairs, because he could feel emotional strings tightening in his chest.

Maybe he slammed the door too hard, but frankly he didn't care. If his dad wanted to get off the couch today at all, it'd be considered an achievement.

Jeremy spent the rest of his day talking to some distant friends online. He did try to talk to Michael some, but they were about a half hour into a call when he had go to leave to go to Costco with his dad.

It was a pretty boring day. Jeremy also tried looked some at his notes for English, since he already had a quiz next week, but that failed miserably. First, he could hardly read his own handwriting, second, his mind was scattered, and third, he just didn't want to. Studying was for nerds, Jeremy was a **geek**.

Instead, after games, he retired to bed for a little.

It was only six when he did, and maybe he'd get out of bed to eat supper sometime tonight, but it'd probably some shitty delivery service, since neither of the Heeres bothered to go shopping ever, and well, Jeremy can't cook regardless.

He sighed, because his stomach was grumbling, and he could admit that empty feeling inside him was bothersome.

"Ugh, I'll do it later." Jeremy murmured to himself, snuggling back into his blankets.

Around an hour later, he begrudgingly emerged from his bed, and drowsed down the stairs.

His legs were kind of numb now, maybe from how he didn't move them for a solid two hours; but he still climbed down the steps.

Frankly, Jeremy wasn't concerned with his father being there.

Often his dad went to bed at earlier hours on the weekend, like seven. Mid-day naps were something Mr Heere frequented in his daily routine, and he still somehow complained about being tired.

It didn't really matter though, nothing did. So Jeremy scoured the fridge for eggs, the pantry for bread, the cupboards for cooking oil or something. But, frankly, he wasn't a good chef. His ingredients were limited, and his culinary knowledge was, too.

The probability he'd find something to make was becoming slim, and the probability he'd make it edible? Even slimmer.

All the eggs in the fridge his dad hard boiled yesterday, too, which was all the more infuriating.

Instead, Jeremy reached for his dad's wallet on the kitchen countertop. He never hid it, maybe it was his fault that it was so accessible to his impulsive teenage son.

Jeremy snuck out a forty dollars, curled the cash in his fist, then laid the wallet back beside the sink
The bickering started pretty calmly.

It was ten o'clock when Mr Heere droned past Jeremy's room, waved in his open door, and asked him about the missing forty bucks from his wallet.

Jeremy at first, denied it. "No.", in a monotonous voice devoid of any sentiment, instead curled with a passive anger.

The beginning was always simplistic, it always started off with those curt, inquisitive questions that somehow struck a nerve with the other.

And maybe, he wasn't in the mood he was in now, Mr Heere would shrug this off as just another interaction with a son who thinks he has it worse.

Mr Heere would otherwise just go back downstairs, take another melatonin supplement, then drowse back to his bedroom for the next eight hours.

But frankly, he hated his son's attitude, for some reason there was something about right now that snapped something in Mr Heere, that told him to persist.

Maybe it was because there was so much conviction in Jeremy's voice, maybe because he didn't even understand consequence anymore, maybe because he thought he could just tread all over his dad and expect his dad would be okay with that.

He wasn't.

Mr Heere's lips curled. "So, did it just jump out of my wallet? Because I haven't moved it all day, and suddenly, forty dollars is missing- and I see you've eaten."

Jeremy scoffed, then shrugged. "So what? I took forty, and I ate, it's not like you ever buy groceries."

The confession only sparked that little stir within Mr Heere. Jeremy was without remorse, and was audaciously blaming him. The sense of entitlement was overwhelming.

"You were probably asleep anyways, since that's all you ever even anymore," murmured Jeremy.

Maybe that’s what started the fight.

It was ten twenty now.

Bellicose arguing from down the hall rung throughout the house, bouncing on the corridor walls as Jeremy and Mr Heere shot responses back at one another, divided by the threshold to Jeremy's room.

Conviction in their voices wasn't enough. It had to be loud, it had to be angry.
Elevation, rambling, Jeremy's vocals breaking as he shouted. Mr Heere's were wobbling, because no, he didn't want to be here, he didn't want to fight his son, but here he was, and he had to stand his ground.

Jeremy won too much, so he ignored the tears pricking in this eyes, and kept yelling.

And Jeremy couldn't help it either.

Jeremy feels hopeless if he doesn't shout, because there's so much injustice and resentment pent inside him from his dysfunctional family.

Why couldn't he just be normal? With a normal, happy parental past? Why did the universe have to consistently ruin his life for him?

Three minutes passed. Now, it was emotional screaming.

"Alright fine, we're a *fucked up family*, I know! But if anything, it's your own fault we're like this, I mean, look at you!"

"You're a low life, shell of a man that can't even *function right* anymore because his wife left him! Who can't even *provide* for his kid, who he doesn't understand is very emotionally traumatized after she left! Like dad, do you seriously fucking think you were the only one she hurt?"

Jeremy didn't want to say that. But he did.

And Jeremy's dad felt the blow to his pride immediately, but it only made him more defensive. He chose the melancholy ignorance.

Disappointed eyes fell to Jeremy, and he shook his head, his tone suddenly toned down and too genuine. "What type of son did I raise?"

That was Jeremy's breaking point. Disappointment tore down any walls. Disappointment was Jeremy's biggest fear.

He noticed the tears fleeing Jeremy's eyes, fast, careening down his cheeks and balling up at his chin.

They dropped into his son's lap and blotted his oversized shirt. But the fifteen year old didn't say anything—no, instead one hand reached for his backpack, and the other to wipe the tears off his face. He waved off Mr Heere with his head turned away.

"I'm going over to Michael's, go back to bed. I'll be... back tomorrow."

It was softer, not shouting anymore, and his voice was raw. Yelling, crying, that's probably why.

Mr Heere’s world suddenly became fuzzy and cold and scary. "Jeremy—"

"Leave me *alone, please.*" he shouted, tears pooling in his eyes again.

Mr Heere hesitated before he left the hall, but he couldn't help Jeremy. He mind as well go rot in his mistakes again. Mr Heere droned back to his own bedroom with his head low.
Meanwhile, Jeremy texted Michael, he was shoving things into his backpack and hitting his head against the side of his bed. The maxim Stupid, stupid, stupid repeated violently in his ears.

The tears were gone now, but the raw emotion was overwhelming.

Self-hatred filled his throat, anything he could try and babble out, anything he tried to think became a pitiful mess where he spewed hateful comments blaming himself.

“jeremy deere ; Hey mikey? Could i come over? I just had a really big fight with my dad and i'm sorry to message you so late but i can't stay here tonight. Today at 10:34”

It was hard to even type. His hands were shaking and his eyes were flitting between the phone.

Every object in his room he was now very aware the presence of and he felt dizzy.

Every action figure he used to collect as a child and that were now stowed on an open top shelf’s eyes were glaring down at him, watching him.

The poster, the Apocalypse of the Damned poster he bought just yesterday, all the characters were now scrutinizing him, calling him weak for crying, calling him weak for leaving, for not fighting more.

A minute passed. Jeremy felt tears pent in his eyes again until his phone nuzzled in his hand.

“michael mellon ; yeah sorry, i didn't see this, come on over, i can get my mother to pick you up. Today at 10:38”

Jeremy haplessly smiled, and grabbed his backpack, which was now stuffed with excess homework, a change of clothes, and his laptop.

“jeremy deere ; It's okay, i'm already walking over actually aha, shouldn't take too long. Today at 10:39”

Yes he lied, and that was fine. Jeremy stood up, quickly ran to his bathroom and grabbed the toothbrush, then darted down the stairs and, on his way out, slammed the door.

The hollow nightly wind was cold and uninviting, but he wore a fuzzy, thick cardigan over his shirt.

Even if his thin legs were very cold, since he was wearing shorts, he'll be fine. The cold was fine.

He didn't want to bother the Mell's anymore either, afterall he probably pestered them enough already; he just asked them if he could sleep over unannounced, at almost-eleven (Jeremy didn’t know, he didn’t even know what day it was. Everything felt sickly and surreal) at night, just
because he couldn't handle being in the same room as his father, because he wanted support.

The cold, now gnawing at his thin skin was justified, he was being *selfish*.

The miserable, frigid, twelve minute, tantalizing walk to Michael’s house was what he deserved.

Just the shell of a boy, with a heavy backpack paining his aching shoulders, with shivering, thin knees and a pallid face, walking down an empty, street-lamp illuminated road.

Chapter End Notes

kudos and comments are always appreciated!
Jeremy, surprisingly enough, wasn’t an openbook when talking about his problems. Of course, there were his some exceptions to the rule— there was his *one* exception to the rule.

And yes, it was Michael. Always the *one* exception to any of his rules.

Because the Mell house has always been Jeremy's safe-haven and second home. It was the place he went to relax, to forget about responsibility, to laugh and smile and remember what it was like to feel happy, even if it was temporary.

It wasn’t an asylum, it wasn't Jeremy's personalized mental hospital, Michael wasn't his therapist— in fact— even if he should— Jeremy hardly even talked about what was bothering him whenever he’d take refuge there.

He’d kind of just let himself forget it all the moment he stepped over the threshold, like an immigrant starting a promising new life across the border.

That life? Retro game nights, snack catering, 80's movie binges and maybe *accidental* cuddling (Jeremy would never admit how safe it made him feel) in Michael's too-small of a bed.

But that didn’t mean he confided in Michael about his *personal* personal life. Jeremy didn’t go through details or let himself cry (at all) about his plights in front of Michael.

Sometimes he’d briefly explain little things that bothered him, or the encompassing vague topics (anxiety, his dad, jocks, etc,) when he was upset to a musing Michael, who’d pop a disc of *Rocky* into his laptop to cheer him up, but it didn’t go much further than that.

And Jeremy didn’t *want or need* any more than that. He didn’t want to describe anything; and he’s made it clear on multiple occasions that he didn’t need to, and that it made him uncomfortable to try. Michael respected that.

But hell, Jeremy wouldn't even open up with *himself* in fear of his own raw emotions; let alone another *male*, who he, apparently in society, was supposed to be competing against in some twisted game of superiority.

Maybe that was society’s fault, for ingraining that in him, maybe his mother’s. Whatever the case, Jeremy was very reclusive about his feelings to himself or anyone else.

To him, he was already emotional enough with Michael, especially recently— and he *hated* himself for it.
So Jeremy repressed his helpless crises, and allowed the pain to ease out only through his nervous social quirks, failed interactions, his off-put sensitivity issues, and his painstaking overanalysis of every small detail.

He **BARRICADED** himself behind fortified walls, behind apathetic expressions and soft, feigned smiles because he, personally, didn’t even want to deal with it. No one did.

The original intent was that he wanted to subside it, push it away temporarily, but, it got to a point where he started fearing his own confrontation. Internal, self-loathing monologues and a growing list of strict, mental **LAWS** kept him in check.

Anxiety attacks were better than admitting he was helpless and broken. Jeremy rather pretend to be okay than admit to the fact that he wasn’t.

Though, something about right now, how his hair was winded back and disheveled, how his skin was frigid on his surface— frankly foretelling how he felt on the inside, too. He was cold, alone, *abandoned*, and it was like he’s being forced to face everything he neglected about himself.

He was surprised he got past a concerned Mrs Mell without tearing up.

She had already been preparing a mug full of Jeremy's favourite hot-chocolate mix on the stove by the time he walked in. When she saw him, she leaned over and brushed the awry curls off Jeremy's face behind his ear.

Her thumb she’d brush up along his cheekbone, muttering “You’re freezing.” faintly.

 Apparently she knew Jeremy wasn’t in the best of spirits too. Mrs Mell was generally a pretty eccentric and persistent woman.

The only thing she insisted on was for Jeremy to hold the warm, but somehow not searing mug between his two hands. Coating something with layers of ceramic muted the heat, Jeremy guessed.

"And, Jeremy, Micah’s upstairs, and very, very worried about you. So, go see him, please.”

Jeremy looked up at her with soft eyes, face flush from the cold, with a clueless expression, as if he couldn’t hear what she was saying.

He nodded though, with a short, tapered smile, one that was only mustered because how she said ‘Micah’ (reminding him of yesterday’s trip to the mall).

For a brief moment, he felt like his cold inside was touched, but regardless, when Jeremy turned to their staircase, he realized the comfort from Mrs Mell was short-lived.

The backpack straps still blistered his shoulders, his hands now were becoming clammy from the warm mug, and the rest of his body was frozen.

And inside, he was screaming, and when he got upstairs, there was so much telling him– as he approached Michael’s bedroom door– to *not* go in.

Because Jeremy felt a familiar, aching, the same cold pang in his chest. The empty feeling that swallowed his heart, that made him feel vulnerable and *abandoned*.

And Jeremy knew what would happen, he knew he’d break the systematic, necessary **LAWS** regarding his emotions, and the **BARRIERS** that kept him quiet, constrained, and secretive.
Because Michael tended to be the one exception to all of his rules.

And he was scared. He was so, so scared to go in. Maybe he was weak, sure, yes, he was weak; but he was scared of that intimacy, that closeness, that dependability that would develop if he saw Michael right now. If he saw anyone right now.

He wasn’t okay, and he didn’t want that validated, but at the same time, he did, he really wanted to be validated, for once in his life.

But there was so little grounding Jeremy now, so little limits and boundaries he’d forced himself to construct that he didn’t care to uphold anymore. He felt like a dead man walking, with breath stolen from his lungs and the knowledge of an impending doom.

Emotions were starting to overwhelm him, and Jeremy’s defenses; the troops on guard, retreated, the walls, destroyed; soon, the LAWS and BARRIERS wouldn’t matter. He was in the upstairs corridor of the Mell house, standing outside Michael’s slightly open door with an antsy look plastered on his face.

He was on the heels of his foot, now pacing outside Michael’s room. Vulnerability itched away at his skin, in turn, the fear of someone seeing him like this was withering away. Because a tiny voice inside him knew he wanted support through the suffering, that he wanted that intimacy, and closeness, and dependability.

And even if there were no other options, no other choice, Jeremy still didn’t know how to cope with facing Michael.

He teetered on the edge of that cliff, because for the past year he intentionally decided not to talk about this, not to feel about this, and here he was, about to jump, about to let go.

Apparently, he should’ve seen this coming, apparently, this was bound to happen.

But Jeremy was just, scared. To take that leap of faith, to unwind and let down his defenses.

And why wouldn’t he be? He’d chosen that he wasn’t going to feel, he numbed himself to these pains so he could live a life uninhibited by the past.

Why would he let go of that hold? Why would he let it torment him?

His face highlighted with a red glow in his nose, cheeks, and chin, thanks to the cold, dank outside he trudged through to get here.

And his face suddenly ran slack and hollow with a sickly feeling, trying to scour for something, a smidge of dignity, in his mind to protect himself with, but he’d hesitated enough. He knew, there was nothing here to hide behind, so why should he try and stall?

Using his shoulder, he pushed into Michael’s ajar door.

Jeremy inhaled, holding the breath, and not letting it go. Puffing his chest out as if he’d be able to play the part of a prideful façade.

Fuck, he couldn’t even do that at school, where it mattered, and the argument, the reminders, were still fresh in his mind.
Jeremy couldn’t even fool himself, there was no way he was going to fool Michael, the guy who could predict his anxiety attacks two minutes in advanced and try to stop them before they happened.

And there was Michael, sitting haplessly on a carpet beside his bed in his same, thick red hoodie, in a surprisingly unlit bedroom Jeremy found himself sharing.

One lonesome orange Yankee Candle was lit on his dresser behind him, but the only other light came from his unblinded window, illumining a dim, pale-blue light.

He twiddled with his hands, laying on the floor. Beside him was a closed laptop, and, enveloped by his fingers, a lighter, whose flame flickered on-and-off.

And Michael looked… oddly aged.

Of course his body’s more matured since the Summer ended, and that was a different story about how Jeremy wasn’t completely over that either— but his face.

Eye bags, purple stained half-circles (that Jeremy usually never saw on Michael’s full skin) hollowed out underneath his eyes. His skin was, less golden-tan, more grey, and maybe it was just the light, but he looked ashen and sad.

Michael looked up at Jeremy with laden eyes, not sleepy, but they lacked Michael’s usual spirit. Yet, his movements weren’t slow, his hands quickly fell to his lap, and one slyly pushed the lighter into his jean pocket.

His head tilted upwards, and he looked disheveled.

He looked raw and sensible, yet rough and uneasy, shady, even. The defined features struck out most, his sharp jaw, the strong brow.

Different. Maybe it was the lack of mirth and giddiness and confidence that typically radiated off Michael’s features.

But then, like he was reading Jeremy’s mind, his hard expression softened. Jeremy’s held breath slowly exhaled through his nose, like he was relieved to see it.

“I’m— really concerned about you, you know.” Michael muttered shyly, in a voice devoid of his casual nerdiness.

Different. A voice he used to be ‘serious’— low, but soft somehow, and cold but still somehow casting warm to the sound.

A different, but not so different Michael Mell.

And Jeremy couldn’t explain why, but suddenly, the room around him started spinning around Michael’s words. He started questioning if this was real— if this was just a dream, and were his eyes tearing up? Or was his depth perception just suddenly blurred? Michael’s red speck was blending into the mesh of desaturated colours that made up the room.

His body started shaking as he realized Michael’s presence— not just a model in a fuzzy, empty space, but as a person, as his friend—, his vision narrowed in on the boy, even if he could barely see him— was Jeremy going blind? Was he going to pass out?

The shaking started in Jeremy’s hands, curling up to his shoulders until a full, wet breath hitched in
his throat.

Jeremy could hardly see. All he knew (and even then, he didn’t; doubting that this was even reality) was that his knees collapsed forwards, and his body fell to the blanketed floor. The backpack twisted off his shoulders.

And his legs found home on Michael’s lap— not necessarily his lap, b— yeah, his lap. He faced Michael, who now, so close, looked so much more like Michael, even through his bleary sight. But Jeremy still tried to not to look in his eyes.

His probably resentful, angry and disappointed eyes Michael would share with Jeremy’s father.

No, no no, wait.

Jeremy became aware of the wet feeling balled in his tearducts and waterline. Suddenly, and uncontrollably, tears streamed down his cheeks, and immediately, to hide from the humiliation, he dug his face into the clavicle of Michael’s hoodie.

He denied that he was crying right now, that anything of tonight had happened. But whims of emotion kept coming, and those LAWS and BARRIERS were breaking down before his eyes.

All Jeremy could do was pretend that tonight: he didn’t fight with his dad, he didn’t walk in the cold to Michael’s house because he was too scared to continue said hypothetical fight. He denied that his head was snug in Michael’s hoodie, that the dark wet blots on the fabric were his tears, that he wanted— that he needed this.

“J-Jeremy,” said Michael, his tone was soft, yet lit with surprise. His hands hesitated airborne, before one started rubbing up and down Jeremy’s back and the other started tousling lightly in his hair.

He couldn’t help when his body started jutting weirdly, when Jeremy was sobbing. His arms were wrapped around Michael’s neck and down his back while their legs laced together on the floor.

Michael could admit that he was ill-prepared for this. Jeremy hardly cried, and never sobbed, at least never with Michael around, if he ever felt himself tearing up, he’d run to the bathroom.

This situation was foreign, rare, this only ever happened once since sixth grade, when his parents’ divorce was officiated last year.

Truth be told, Michael didn’t really know how to comfort Jeremy, he didn’t have any understanding of what was happening, if he was okay, what’d happened at home— for Jeremy to physically be sobbing into Michael’s chest, it must’ve been devastating.

Michael’s mind sunk to the worst assumptions while his hands numbly played with Jeremy’s soft curls and kneaded into his skull. “It’ll be okay, Jer.” came from his mouth, but it sounded garbled and hasty.

Michael wanted to ask questions, he wanted to scream them and hunt down whoever made Jeremy feel this way, but the words caught in his throat. Michael was hesitant and scared, and only could do what he thought would make him feel better. Michael sympathized with Jeremy in his confusion, because hell, Michael never saw him this way, and he knew Jeremy was definitely scared too.

Oh, Michael felt lost, albeit, he couldn’t deny that under the sympathy, under the confusion and worry, a small dosage of happiness was definitely present. Maybe he wanted to be Jeremy’s
shoulder to cry on.

But it didn’t matter right now. Jeremy mattered.

“I’m s-oh-soh so-rh-ry,” hicced Jeremy. He moved his head just a little to breathe and snifflle, but then his head sunk back deeply into Michael’s sweatshirt, to the same spot where Michael could feel the wet spot press into his neck.

The room filled with Jeremy’s hasty breaths and sobs. Michael felt broken seeing Jeremy like this, so he hugged him tighter.

“Shh, Jer, it’s okay.”

Michael patted the back of Jeremy’s neck, doing all in his power to think of things that would comfort the boy. It was so… weird, seeing Jeremy like this, it’s been a long time. Was this a regular thing for Jeremy? Did he break down often?

He hoped not.

His sympathetic eyes met Jeremy’s, but only for a second before the latter dug back into his neck. The sobs became louder and his panicked breaths sounded like he was hyperventilating. Tears were streaming down his face, either caught in the red fabric of Michael’s sweater, or rolling down his neck into his own oversized shirt.

Michael couldn’t find words to say, his whole world was upside-down and yet his mind could only focus only on Jeremy.

Jeremy Heere, the boy who went through life with him, who challenged him with snide, comedic ridicule, who played 90’s video-games with him in his basement and who whispered snarky comments in a hushed giggle fit in the top row at the movie theatre, who he’s known for almost eleven years; Jeremy Heere, who was now sobbing profusely into his sweatshirt.

Jeremy Heere, the boy who’s list of LAWS and BARRIERS would never allow him the comfort of said sweatshirt, who didn’t want to let go of Michael, who just wanted to sit here and cry until his eyes were raw; because he couldn’t even hear himself think, he couldn’t hear his consciousness tell him to stop, he couldn’t hear the dejecting voices telling him that he’s crossed a line, that this is too intimate.

No.

He wants to be here, he’d rather be here than anywhere else. He wants to be here, panicking in Michael’s arms, rather than hyperventilating in the fetal position, alone in his cold bedroom with his dad’s ruthless and defensive shouting reverberating off his walls.

“M-M-ichael,” Jeremy softly said between hics and whimpers, voice bordering on shrill.

Maybe he’s been on the verge of tears for a while now, maybe his eyes had gone blurry and he just didn’t register his bleary waterline, but something about Jeremy saying his name between sobs grounded him to the fact that Jeremy was crying, in his arms—a fact he’d known before, but only realized now.

And frankly, now Michael was crying, too. He was panicking, uttering nothings out of his mouth incessantly to try and help calm Jeremy down.

Michael tried not to sob. Trying to be some sort of beacon of resiliency for Jeremy to hold on to,
but fuck, looking at Jeremy’s tearstained cheeks and his raw, red scleras illumined softly by the
candle behind them, felt like a kick to the gut. Like the pit of his stomach had just been impaled by
a hot knife, which was now twisting and and turning around. That’s how awful it was.

It was overwhelming, his throat clogged up and proper sentences were a tenfold more difficult to
make. Words bubbled in his throat and didn’t go past that. But he stayed still, letting tears silently
pour out of his eyes.

They stayed like that for a long time, sometimes, Jeremy would try to hiccough out words, but
those jumbled out as a spluttering mess. And Michael would shush him fondly, saying “Let it out
Jer, talk when you’re ready, okay?” while stroke his hand down his back. Jeremy would whine
back in docile accord.

It took about ten minutes to get where Jeremy had his head propped up on Michael’s
shoulderblades with eyes dry and raw, and where he could speak without sputtering out nervously,
intervened with sobs.

Jeremy’s face was wet with streams of tears smeared across his cheeks. His arms were still
wrapped around Michael’s back slackly, and he was still sitting on one of his thighs, leaning into
him.

Yeah, he couldn’t lie and say their positioning wasn’t a little haphazard and awkward, but he could
say that it was the safest he’s felt in a long time.

A lot less broken than when he had came in.

“Micah,” mouthed Jeremy softly. He was quiet, playing with Michael’s slicked hair to calm him
down the rest of the way, his head nuzzled on a slant near his clavicle.

Michael respected the vigil, but hummed to the tune of a slow song— he too coming down from
tears— and rubbed circles into Jeremy’s back empathetically. Jeremy could feel the vibrations in
Michael’s throaty hum.

The room was no longer spinning, no, in this comfortable silence did Jeremy feel, for once, like he
was the luckiest boy on Earth.

Because he was lucky enough to have Michael in his life, and for some reason, that outweighed all
the bad right now, all the deepset abandonment issues and dysfunctionality and anxiety. It seemed
like right now, Michael was the one thing that mattered.

And that’s when Michael asked the first question, breaking their hush.

“Are.. you okay, Jer-bear?”

The nickname allowed some levity, allowed Jeremy’s heart to stir. But, ignoring that, he very
breathily murmured.

“I think so.”
He started coughing into the air saliently, it was curt and throaty, and his head instantly fell back onto Michael. “S-sorry for uhm.”

Jeremy turned his head away. “Whatever the fuck just happened with me.”

Michael let out a dry chuckle, but then tightened his arms around Jeremy. One arm reached up, and brushed the loose hairs off the boy’s face.

Maybe Michael found it awkward, their positioning, considering Jeremy wasn’t hysterically crying anymore and they didn’t have much else to focus on. Fortunately for Jeremy, Michael didn’t say anything about how awkward it was for him to be sitting on one of his legs, since Jeremy kind of found it comforting.

“I’d never judge, Jeremy. S’okay.” said Michael, and there was something raspy to his voice. “Do you, do you want to talk about it, can you talk about it?”

Jeremy nodded into Michael’s sweatshirt.

“Does that mean I have to uh—“

Jeremy pulled back and looked down at their enmeshed legs, chuckling and aiming for some levity. “dismount?”

Luckily, Michael found it funny too, and chortled dryly at his comment. “You don’t, but my leg is getting a little sore, so if we’re going to continue with this, please switch to my left leg.”

Jeremy giggled, and perhaps Michael was just kidding around, but he rolled off his right leg, mounted his left, and readjusted his head into the other symmetrical half of where he’d been crying.

Nice to not be reminded of his tears as he snug the side of his cheek into the familiar spot near Michael’s neck. Maybe it was the scent of Michael’s sweatshirt that was so enticing and comforting, warm vanilla and a distant scent of aged detergent.

Though, even though Jeremy couldn’t see, Michael admittedly was a little flustered by how Jeremy had just needily snuck back into the opposite crook on his neck. “Smartass.” he mumbled indignantly, before his eyes tipped back to Jeremy.

There was something about how Jeremy intentionally wanted to stay enveloped in his arms that made Michael feel needed.

And that’s when Michael asked his second question.

“What happened tonight?” he said.

Oh, boy. That was a long question that sprung into a flowchart of more connected questions. A long, deeply stream path of Jeremy’s life story that resulted in chronic anxiety and a very flawed family life.

In a way, everything was related, every dot was connected like the pattern on a tapestry.


*No, you have to tell him more than just that, Jeremy.* he thought.

Looking up, Michael was content with twiddling his thumbs into and around the back of Jeremy’s
hair while he listened. Jeremy couldn’t lie and say it wasn’t soothing.

“I— I realize I never tell you the— the full story to anything, and I, I probably should, you know? We’re best friends, for over a decade now, and I,“

“S’okay though.” Michael said. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

Jeremy’s eyes twinkled with that same encompassing bleariness on his waterline, but he blinked it away before succumbing to tears again. A breath hitched in his throat.

”I want to, I’ve wanted to for a long time.” he whispered.

“Maybe I really need some support in my life and I’ve— sort of been denying that because I don’t want to be selfish, and I’m arrogant, too, and people tell me it’s weird talking about this with other dudes.” Jeremy wheezed out, hinging the sentence on a short breath. “I mean, you also already do so much for m—“

Michael pressed his finger to Jeremy’s wet lips, his hand cupping around the latter’s chin. The sensation made him tingle in all sorts of ways, but Jeremy ignored that.

With his other hand, Michael trolled through his own hair and let his posture stunt a little, finding comfort slouched against his dresser with Jeremy leaning onto him.

“First off Jeremy, you do need support in your life— but you can only get it if you ask, y’know? And we’ve been best friends, best, best friends for eleven years, telling me shit isn’t gonna change how I see you, and—“ Michael paused.

“you’ve got to remember, I don’t do that much, nothing that a best, best friend wouldn’t do.”

Michael wasn’t looking down at Jeremy anymore, he stared blankly at the wall across from them and rubbed his hand down Jeremy’s shoulder and down his arm. “And it’s not selfish, it’s not weird, to need support. Especially with the… divorce, it’s rough.”

The divorce was one of the things that Jeremy was pretty private about. The details, at least; he only told Michael that his parents wanted a divorce (no reasoning as to why), his mother lost custody of him (which was true somewhat, but there was more to the story than just that), moved away, and that his dad was having a tough time dealing with it.

Brief things, that Michael only occasionally asked about, because he knew it was a sensitive topic.

Most of what Michael knew was pieced together through the little undertones Jeremy subconsciously hid in his tendencies, but it was all assumptions that he didn’t press Jeremy on.

“Sorry if this is rude to say, but you don’t really have a mother figure in your life anymore, and I know for a lot of guys, that’s where they go to get support. But I don’t want you to think you can’t talk to me.”

It wasn’t rude to say, it was the truth. Jeremy clutched to Michael’s sweatshirt a little tighter and dug his face deeper into the neck of it.

Maybe he was trying to avoid tears again. “I know. And erm, i—s this weird to you? I can, uhm, get off your leg if that’s better. But I like it here.”

Michael weakly chortled. He seemed to be calmed down, the slight shakiness in his tone made good riddance, but his voice was still hoarse. “No, it’s not that awkward actually. Just uhm, talk, if
you want to.”

Oh, yeah. He was supposed to talk. That was the point. The prospect though admittedly made him shaky in his hands, but it was controllable.

“Y–yeah, I will, I mean.. I don’t really know where to start. I guess like, tonight in particular.”

Jeremy dry coughed, clearing his throat, and then sniffled again. “Well, to start, I uhm, I took forty from my dad’s wallet, to order food, right? He was asleep, and we haven’t bought groceries in weeks, and I can’t cook either way so.”

Break.

“I got food, I ate, I went back into my room and then, maybe like, an hour ago, my dad came in my room and asked about it. I denied it, right, I don’t re— really know why? I just didn’t want to deal with it, I guess. A-and well,”

The pace of his words became quick and inconsistent. “then it became a thing about me acting entitled and not asking him,” Jeremy sniffled again. “And I started yelling about how he’s lazy and sleeps all day and is essentially a loser now. He’s been so broken since mom— since mom left, and I called him out on it.”

His tone was elevating, his breaths becoming quicker, his grasp on Michael’s back became a deathly clutch.

“I called him out on not being able to provide for me because he’s just waiting for her to come back, but sh– but she’s not! She’s just not coming back, Michael.”

Jeremy took another pause, he sighed (was it out of relief? Michael had no clue) into Michael’s sweatshirt and his body hiccupsed upwards. Michael’s hand reached for his nape, massaging his thumb into it.

“And dad knows it, she wouldn’t have cheated on him if she didn’t want ‘im anymore. She wouldn’t have left, abandoned us, moved to Arizona with her new boyfriend, if she wanted us.”

Michael sat, lowly in shock. He stayed quiet, murmuring to Jeremy’s story and trying to soothe him with soft pats and hair kneading.

“And I could see why, I mean—” Jeremy hesitated, his breath hitched in his throat and his arms tightened around Michael again. “my dad’s fat, pretty ugly, and lazy, and especially after the miscarriage? There was just… a lot of grief, a lot of tension between them. They didn’t even sleep in the same bed anymore.”

He paused, and Michael noticed how he was shaking. “And me, y’know? She never really liked me either, I guess I— I just was never in her image, of, of what she wanted her son to be. And even my dad admitted it too, I’m not what he wanted either.”

Michael felt familiar, distant wet spots push up against the skin on his neck. Much like on the other half of his collarbone, Jeremy’s tears were seeping through his sweatshirt. Michael felt pity overwhelm him.

“Even if she didn’t treat me right, I miss her, a lot— and besides, I probably deserved it.”

A long pause made Jeremy’s frequent sniffles salient. The tearstain on Michael’s hoodie was only growing.
Michael whispered, because apparently, he couldn’t muster to make his voice any louder despite the utter frustration in his throat.

“That’s not true, Jer. You deserve a lot more than you probably think, a lot more than shitty parents.”

Though it was soft, it was confident. And Jeremy didn’t object, or agree, all he did was murmur, and let that murmur shift out into a long pause, where he just waited for himself to calm down again in the comfort of Michael’s sweatshirt.

“My mom, uhm, last year, gave up custody of me during the divorce. She s—said that she didn’t—that —she didn’t want me.” stammered Jeremy, readjusting his head a little more snugly.

He couldn’t deny his own neediness, so luckily, Michael was very complimentary in giving him that attention and silent support.

“She stayed with her boyfrie- boyfriend, during the divorce, and only came back to get her shit, get some of my dad’s shit, then leave. She didn’t care a-about me, or my dad, she just wanted to g—go.”

Maybe Michael was judging him. He softly started crying again into the other’s neck, and when he looked up, there were similar tears quietly streaming down Michael’s face.

“I’m sorry, Jere, I’m so sorry you had to go through that.” mumbled Michael. The rubbing of Michael’s hand down Jeremy’s arm became twitchy and rough.

Jeremy looked at Michael soppily, then looked back down, tucking his head back under Michael’s chin. “nd you know, I already thought I was a loser, and seeing how my own mom didn’t care for me, didn’t want me, it sort of… reinforced that idea.”

His own eyes were inundated with tears, and his arms hugged around Michael’s waist now as he snuggled into the collar of the hoodie. Jeremy felt vulnerable, he felt weak and broken, and maybe, truthfully, he’s always been this way, that he’s only admitting this now.

But at least he wasn’t alone, Michael shared sympathetic tears and disregarded the LAWS and BARRIERS, too. At least they were in this together.

“I don’t know why he wants her back so much, but it’s ruined my dad.” murmured Jeremy. “And it’s just, it’s been rough between us.”

For the longest time, there was silence. Jeremy was done with his confessions, so he sat in the same familiar comfortable vigil like it had been. The same familiar hand patted his back, the same familiar scent of the sweatshirt underneath his nose. The same familiar shaking in his bones slowed.

“T–thank you, Michael,”

“For what?”

“For— for listening to me, calming me down, letting me stay over,” Jeremy sighed, chuckling a little. “for letting me sit really awkwardly on you, I can’t imagine you’re comfortable.”

Michael’s hasty breath and offhand giggle made Jeremy smile. “Don’t you thank me, first off, and
secondly, it’s surprisingly pretty comfy. You can sit on my lap any time you want,” remarked Michael, and by his inflection on his words, he probably added one of those stupidly smug winks of his.

Jeremy’s face heated up, and he jerked himself back, then drilled his face into Michael’s neck, suddenly very hot and very embarrassed.

Somehow, the emptiness— not completely gone— wasn’t sad and miserable anymore, he felt excitable and happy. “You’re so fucking stupid.” he giggled.

“Oh, shit, did I actually just say that?”

Michael tried to laugh the joke off with awkward chuckling, but it only made the situation funnier.

For some reason, the ‘unintentional’ (Jeremy did not see how a comment about lap-sitting was unintentional, but whatever) ribald joke sent indulgent shocks down that boy’s spine. Shocks Jeremy tried to neglect. “S-sorry.” Michael sighed.

Jeremy looked up at a red-faced Michael, and giggled some more. “I-it’s okay, just uhm… caught me off guard.”

He smiled as he pressed his face back up against the hoodie, trying to forget the sudden spiraling, perhaps wanton, warmth that’d alarmed him. “Another thing that might catch you off guard, I didn’t really know when’s the best time to say this,” Michael sighed apprehensively, twiddling with his fingers, which literally could not be a good sign in this, or any universe. “Have you ever, uhm, tried pot?”

If Jeremy had a drink, he’d spit it. He snorted and accidentally smacked the top of his head against Michael’s chin, receiving a “Alright, ow.” from the other boy, who was now clutching his jaw.

Things happened so quickly. Emotions changed in a matter of instants.

“And it’s a serious question, c’mon.”

Jeremy giggled a little, jutting backwards and placing his hand over Michael’s against his chin. “Sorry,” said Jeremy, with a lit smile and a flush of post-cry happiness he hardly ever felt.

Fuck, Michael made everything a lot easier on Jeremy, didn’t he? “but, no I haven’t.” His tone was skeptical and off-key. “H- have you?”

Michael nodded, but it was a lot more shy and nervous than when he’d first posed the question. Jeremy guessed the starting confidence he had in the topic wore off. “I started doing it last year, like end of last year, a— and I don’t really know your stance on weed, but I wanted to see if you wanted to try it for the first time? Like, right now, if you want.”

“I mean, sure it’s probably not the best time now since the last half hour has been a fucking rollercoaster of emotions for you but like, I thought also it might help you just, relieve your stre—”

Jeremy tilted his head puzzledly, and cut Michael off with a breathy laugh.

“Wow, y’anno, I wasn’t expecting that.” Jeremy said through a smile, brushing his hand up into his scalp and combing through his messy curls. “But uhm, sure! I’m down to try it.”

Michael shared Jeremy’s same gleeful, surprised look. Probably because he’d never suspect
paranoid Jeremy Heere, who physically cared way too much about other people’s opinions of him, who probably had asthma, who seemed pretty apprehensive about those sketchy, drugged-out kid who sat, backs to wall, behind the school— to actually be down to smoke weed with him.

“Oh, really? Like, serious?”

Jeremy laughed, and nodded his head. The vulnerable feeling was still open and wide in his chest, but it wasn’t sad anymore.

He didn’t want to cry, it was warm and fuzzy and happy. All he wanted to do now was hang out, and be with Michael, just for tonight, have Michael, just for tonight.

Some knot in his stomach said that he shouldn’t be thinking those things, but his internal dialogue took control. What did Jeremy have to lose?

Even if Jeremy was still sitting on his leg, and he couldn’t really stand up, Michael’s body twisted to the drawers beside him.

On the middle drawer of his dresser, which he couldn’t visually see the contents of, he blindly trolled his hand against the bottom and hummed in search.

When his face contorted to one of those “Aha!” moments, his hand snaked out from the dresser, and in it carried a small, red box. It looked like a painted version of one of the D.I.Y. chests from the Dollar Tree, probably not the one from yesterday though. The sizing was different.

“Alright— and just so we’re clear, do you want to do this? Like, it’s not just because you want to be a cool guy and don’t want to pussy out? ‘Cause bro, I’m totally fine with not hitting a joint with you, I just wanna make sure you’re comfortable.” Michael said, and he said it pretty fastly— he was excitedly looking down at the box and flitting back up to Jeremy.

Jeremy smiled. It was new, yes, but secretly, Jeremy’s kind of wanted an opportunity like this. While he’d never go out and buy pot himself (simply because Jeremy had no connections and was pretty sure, with his luck, that his first drug deal would end up with him kidnapped in a basement), he’s kind of always wanted to try it.

“Okay, I was actually just about to hit a joint before you texted me, which is why that candle’s lit.” Michael chuckled, alluding to the illuming orange candle on the dresser above them. “It masks the scent pretty well. Anyway.”

He flicked his finger up against the locket, Jeremy still sitting just above his kneecap, and watching closely as he pulled out what Jeremy assumed to be a joint wrapper, a short, cylindrical and metal-esque container, and a bunch of rolled pieces of cardboard.

“Hey, could you get off me for a second while I do this?”

With a little swoosh of Michael’s hand, Jeremy shyly dismounted Michael and lended him the space he probably needed.

In between his legs, Michel focused his hands and spread out a square of thin, brown, vaguely translucent paper. On top of it, “the filter” (as Michael called it) alluding to the small, rounded cardboard he stuck around one end of the paper, and then finally, he tapped out a mound of not-so finely grounded pot from the metal case.

“Don’t ask how I get this stuff.” Michael chuckled.
A sixteen year old having pot wasn’t the craziest thing around. Hell, some of the first-years were probably knee-deep in meth already. But Michael seemed so smug and casual about it. “Even if you asked, I don’t really know the answer anyways.”

That was reassuring to hear, but Jeremy didn’t really mind right now. Michael said he’d been smoking since freshman summer, so he probably knew what he was doing.

By his gusto and steady confidence in his hands, Michael’s either watched a lot of tutorials on how to roll a joint, or was just lucky this time under pressure. Whatever it was, Michael’s prideful façades were nothing new to Jeremy, so the latter boy chuckled it off and watched.

Within the next five minutes, Michael rolled the paper around the line of weed, stuffed in the pot (some accidentally came out and fell onto the blanket underneath him, but he scooped it up and put it back in the metal canister), and thinned out the joint.

To seal it, he licked down the excess paper and pressed the fold down. Surprisingly, it stuck.

“Ta-da.”

Michael readjusted himself and invited Jeremy closer, sweeping the rest of whatever excess weed particles he couldn’t see under the blanket.

“I don’t think you could take an entire joint on your own, so we’ll share.” Michael said with a smile, and even though Jeremy’s mind was in the gutter, Michael didn’t seem like he noticed anything off about his phrasing.

Instead, his hand dug in his pocket. “I’ll go first, unless you have like, a problem with germs, but we’ve literally shared toothbrushes before so,”

The lighter came out with his hand, Jeremy nodded.

“Watch, you just.”

Michael’s hand twitched, and his lighter’s flicker lit the joint’s end. With closed eyes, he pressed the joint on his lips, one hand propping it up like a cigar. The other retreated itself and the lighter back into his pocket.

With a deep, prolonged and soundless inhale, Michael’s lungs filled with the smoke, his lips abandoned the filter, and a small piece of the fiery tip of the joint disintegrated as tiny fragments of ash into his lap.

He paused, and didn’t exhale for a second, but when he did, smoke softly plumed out of his mouth like a dragon. Michael’s face looked relaxed, calm, before he handed Jeremy the joint.

Jeremy was apprehensive, yes, not because he was uncomfortable with smoking, just because gossip always spread around about how naïve first smoke smokers were and their exaggerated reactions. And well, he didn’t want to embarrass himself, even in front of Michael.

But, he’d try his best, he already promised he would.

So he arrogantly lifted the joint to his own lips, looked steadily away from Michael, tried to heavily breathe in through his mouth, and—

ended up getting the smoke caught in his throat no matter how hard he tried to choke it down.
Michael’s attempts not to laugh at Jeremy doubling over (and coughing the smoke out) failed. Snickers got past his lips easily.

“That’s adorable.” Michael chuckled.

Jeremy sat back up again, ignoring the flutter in his stomact, and his eyes were already starting to look pinkish—not from the high, the irritation. “Just, just try and breathe slowly into it.”

His throat was gravelly, the smoke was a little harsh going in. He shot Michael a stubborn glance and tried again, going a little slower rather than headfirst.

But he failed, again, keeling slightly with a faint smoke puffing out of his coughs. It was painful.

“This is stupid.” Jeremy insisted, his voice notably more scratchy. “How do you even do this?”

Michael smiled, his face was lit with a radiating happiness, his mouth cracked open with a giggle. “I make it look easy, I guess.”

And yes. Smoking was difficult, maybe Jeremy was doing something wrong, but he couldn’t help but focus on all the technicalities. Like how the filter felt weird and plasticky between his lips, or how it was too warm and heavy smoke, or how he would immediately get cold feet, and panic, and his airwaves would get blocked off and sort of burn harshly. It was like he was trying to swallow down the smoke instead of inhale it.

Then, an idea popped into Jeremy’s head, and albeit the fact that it was nearly shot down immediately, he persisted. The words It’s whatever. What do you have to lose? popped back into his head.

Jeremy sighed dutifully before imposing a question that would probably make the mood of the room go awkward and still. For some reason, his anxiety was turned off right now.

“D— do you know how to shotgun? I heard that makes it easier.”

And Michael did, go silent, and even if it was only in thought, Jeremy still felt his stomach flip in anxiety. Oh, there it is. He regretted even mentioning it, the unreadable expression Michael wore was suddenly killing him.

“Well, yeah, I do, hell it’s not that hard for me. Are you asking for me to shotgun for you?”

The joint was now back in Michael’s hand, tilted in a way so the ashes would fall into the Dollar Tree chest from earlier. He occasionally popped it in his mouth to take brief hits of it.

Welp, no turning back now.

“Y—yes. Is that okay with you?”

There was that same familiar smile plastered on Michael’s notably slacker features. Did pot work that fast? Well, Michael was a pretty relaxed person anyways, so it wasn’t out of the ordinary; still, maybe in context, it felt weird to see.

“Of course Jer, c’mere, and if you want, you can sit on my leg again, that’d probably make this easier anyways.”

It felt a little awkward mounting Michael’s leg and being that close to him (with the knowledge and intention that he’d have to look him in the face) but he did. Reaffirming the same position
above his knee.

“Is this okay?”

Michael nodded. It was clear, to Jeremy, that he was buffing through the nervous air to make Jeremy feel better. “You don’t have to move or anything, just when I exhale, breathe in. It should be a lot easier not taking it straight from the joint. Either way, please try not to cough in my face if you have to.”

Jeremy nodded, he shifted up on Michael’s leg so they were closer. One hand was, for leverage, pressed against Michael’s left shoulder, the other was on the floor for balance.

“Oh, and tilt your head a little to the side, I’m at a weird angle here, alright?” suggested Michael. The boy obliged. Michael repeated his first actions with the joint, then started leaning in, angling his own head a little upwards.

And that’s when Jeremy felt adrenaline shock his spine.

*Calm down, Heere, just pot. Just pot, just pot that you happen to be smoking through Michael’s mouth, not a problem.*

For some alien reason, Jeremy didn’t have control over whether or not his eyelids were open or closed. Instead, in meager attempts to close them and *look away, damnit*, Jeremy’s lids squinted.

His lips halfly parted as Michael leaned in. Jeremy tried to ignore how close their mouths were, and how he could feel Michael’s face hover over his own, and instead he forcefully shut his eyes.

Michael’s hand reached over onto Jeremy’s jaw softly to keep his face in place. Jeremy might’ve squeaked, but he was pretty sure Michael didn’t hear it.

Fuck. He’s really close, isn’t he?“

And when Jeremy heard him exhale, he breathed in deeply through his own mouth. Excess smoke billowing like soft whispers against his red, nervous cheeks.

The smoke tickled— and he fought the urge to cough it back up out of his mouth— the sensation alien, but this time, it was easily repressed. It slid down his throat, filled halfly his lungs, notably, the strength was much weaker. He held his breath, and kept his eyes intentionally closed.

Because for all he knew, Michael was still floating above his face.

“Good, good– I’m going to hit it again.”

Jeremy could sense slightly, the absence of Michael, and the buzzing sound of him breathing in another hit of their joint before returning to linger over Jeremy.

Jeremy couldn’t resist opening his eyes as he exhaled his own plume of weak smoke.

And he was. There *Michael* was, hovering two inches from his mouth with shut eyes and parted, full lips— incubating smoke— tantalizingly close to his own. His cheeks were slightly reddish, and his skin was the same tan colour, and he was warmly illuminated by the overhead candlelight, and his face was hugged by dissipated tendrils of smoke, and God, Michael was kind of handsome, wasn’t he?

Then Jeremy realized that Michael was probably the only person Jeremy would’ve *considered*
getting this close to, even if it was just to shotgun smoke. Jeremy asked himself why, but it didn’t take long to find his answer.

Because Michael was the one exception to all his rules, apparently. And maybe Jeremy sort of liked that.

So it didn’t matter how Michael’s lips were teasing his own, so temptingly close.

And, as he sat on top of Michael’s thigh and examined the latter’s features through laden windows of smoke, Jeremy wasn’t going to lie and say Michael wasn’t attractive, and that didn’t matter either. That his personality, his carved facial features, his heart, and his interests weren’t attractive to Jeremy.

That Michael, even with nerdy, thickly framed black glasses and an oversized hoodie decorated with sewn-on retro patches, wasn’t handsome and adorable and loving and perfect.

Didn’t matter. Did not matter.

And maybe that’s why it was so hard to take his eyes off him, to tear his eyes away. All Jeremy wanted to do was look at him, like a piece of art. A new, funny feeling, something he dismissed as a side effect of the weed.

But then Michael’s mouth parted a little wider, and let out a billow of smoke.

So Jeremy closed his eyes again, refuting them away off Michael on the excuse that the smoke irritated his eyes. In fact, he was so caught up in his head that he almost forgot to inhale the smoke; remembering that, Jeremy breathed in and caught all he could.

It was the same feeling, the same scratchy warmth driving down his throat and itching his lungs. Like one of those knitted scarves, some cut threads and split ends poking at his neck. At least it was better than taking it straight from the joint.

This time, there was also a very minor, light feeling of giddiness in his head.

Michael fell back against the dresser and looked expectantly up at Jeremy, who sat in his same position with his eyes closed peacefully.

He breathed out, letting the smoke clear his lungs. Grateful to finally get some actual oxygen, because he missed it, even if now it was all now tainted with weed.

“So?” asked Michael. “Was that better?”

He murmured and nodded. Whatever his internal monologue had said Jeremy decided to keep quiet about and ignored for now. “Easier, I mean, I got it down! And uh, I liked that.”

Michael’s grin made Jeremy feel insanely warm and happy, another fact he wouldn’t admit. “That’s good, tell me if you start uhm, feeling high. You’ll probably know the feeling when it really kicks in.”

Then, he shrugged and tapped the end of the joint into the box. “If it’ll kick in for you, I dunno. I’ve never had someone shotgun for me.”

“I guess we’ll see. Anyway… we’ve had a, a pretty long night. Y’wanna kick in some Terminator and head to bed?” requested Jeremy.
His stomach, albeit fluttering, made his face fluster pink and heat up his cheeks, so he got the hint that he was kind of embarrassed and just wanted to move onto another topic.

Rocky, and other 80’s films, were their go-to movies because one, Michael’s had almost all of the classics on DVD since eighth grade, two, they loved making fun of them (even if they were good movies), and three, they’ve seen them so many times that they were one of the easiest things to fall asleep to. Old movies with shameless acting, a sleepover ritual.

“Sure. I’m gonna clean up here, go brush your teeth n’ stuff.” he smiled, urging Jeremy off his leg with a playful slap on the back.

The boy grabbed his backpack and lifted off into the outside hall. Michael swore he heard him sigh loudly as he left, maybe out of relief, but he ignored it.

Instead he stood up, and got on with his post-smoking cleanup routine: blowing out his candle, smothering the joint into a ceramic bowl, then slipping the ashes into a stack of tissue paper that Michael dished away. A usual for him.

Then, he brought his laptop up onto the foot of his bed, and changed into night attire, and packed away his ‘weed-smoking starter kit’ back underneath his pants in the middle-right drawer of his dresser.

A satisfied smile pressed his lips, one he probably couldn’t wipe away even if he tried.

The night ended with a pair of high idiots laying in the same bed with enmeshed legs underneath the covers. A distantly humming tape of The Terminator at the foot of Michael’s bed narrated their lazy night away.

Jeremy laid comfortably in bed beside Michael— who’s arm flung around his waist warmly— and ignored the subconscious voice telling him that doing these things with his best friend was weird, and gay.

Through the comfort of Arnold’s poor acting, the lull of weed, Michael, and his long day leaving him exasperated, he drifted off to the night’s escape. His mind left blank.

And truthfully, it wasn’t worth his time to pent thoughts up about the last hour, or today generally. Tomorrow would be fine, he’d see his dad, he’d apologise. And tonight? And Michael? Well, that just wasn’t worth the anxiety right now, it wasn’t worth useless worrying or paranoia.

It’s not like he had control of the reigns, of the rules anyways. They were constantly broken, and disrespected, courtesy of Michael Mell.

And Jeremy wouldn’t have it any other way.

It’d been a good night, with a good ending. So he shut up about the running thoughts.

The weed, and Michael’s soft murmuring, let him relax as he soothed himself into the backbone of the mattress. “Nighty Jer.”

The voice came from his right. He smirked. “Goodnight, Mikey.”
“No Micah?” Michael mumbled, his tone was lazy but lingering with sarcastic disappointment.

It was hard not to feel like this was the definition of perfection. Haphazard nicknames that only Michael could make sound natural, both awake only in dazy spirits after a long day.

“Fine, goodnight Micah.”

Vision became fuzzy and grey, until there was no more room, until all the colours melted together.

And blackness, even the laptop screen’s recording of The Terminator blended away.

The one thing he noticed was the sensation of Michael’s head snuggling up into the hook of his arm.

And Jeremy let him, snuggle up into the hook of his arm.

That was alright.

Even if Michael was the one exception to all of his rules, maybe Jeremy didn’t need those rules in the first place.

Chapter End Notes

also! sorry this took so long to get out, i’ve been stressed with school and studying, next week is exams and ughh it’s so much! so if im a little spotty with my updating schedule, i apologise! not giving up on this fic <3 (:
Chapter Notes

hey! sorry i’ve been so absent from writing recently. i had exams all last week and i
had to focus and study on those instead, so i didn't get much writing done then. but i’m
back! and here’s a pretty long chapter to make up for my absence

either way, thank you so much to all the people who’ve been supportive of this book
so far! in comments, kudos, bookmarks, or just reading it, it makes me very happy. :)

also, there is tagalog in this chapter, and i personally don't speak tagalog, so i’ve been
asking my friends and using translators to get the point across.

at the end of the chapter i have a bunch of notes on what i’m trying to convey in the
translation. i don't know if it's 100% correct but please forgive me if it's wrong haha.

anyway, thank you guys for your patience, i hope you enjoy this chapter <3

Jeremy woke up Sunday morning from probably one of the best sleeps he’s had in a few years.

Lulled, yesterday, to bed by a weed-induced fuzzy feeling in his head, by the odd comfort of
Michael’s arm slung across his midriff, by a low, indistinguishable anecdote playing on a laptop.

And there was ease, quiet, and things might’ve felt okay for once.

And when he woke up, things felt kind of… weird. He didn’t feel the same guilt he typically woke
up with every morning, nor that weight that strangled his lungs.

Jeremy felt normal, maybe. What was normal supposed to feel like anyways? Waking up without a
ball of anxiety in your throat?

Jeremy wouldn’t know, but whatever it was, he woke up grateful— and with a smile, because
when he looked down, both of Michael’s arms were now straddling his waist beneath the duvet.

Jeremy guessed that he must’ve been a koala or something in his dream, because he was hugging
Jeremy like a tree.

If he could reach his phone right now, he’d love to take a photo, but his arms were encased in the
firm bedsetting and he was very comfortable, thank you very much. So he just sat, and admired.

Michael’s head had fallen from it’s nightly position cuddled into the crook of Jeremy’s arm, and
his glasses-less-ness allowed his nose to press into the divot of the covers, which smushed his
features down. His nose dragged upwards against the pillow and wrinkled like a pig’s.
Jeremy also noticed (on a side-note) how his lips were slightly parted as he breathily snored. Kind of adorable, to add onto the silliness of Michael’s piglet-akin nose.

Yeah, and by the way, Jeremy knew he shouldn’t think Michael’s quirks as ‘adorable’, because that was gay, but sometimes could he at least admit when something was cute? If Jeremy was a girl, then maybe he’d find Michael’s quirks endearing, and maybe he’d aw at him, but he wasn’t a girl.

Well, he did aw at Michael, but this was different, Jeremy’s aw was sarcastic.

And besides, no one was here to hear him either, it didn’t matter.

Whatever. Ignoring that thought (which was surprisingly easy to do today), Jeremy began to chuckle, because when he sat up, Michael’s arms slackly followed his movements and continued to cling around his waist, hauling across the bedspread and over Jeremy’s lap.

For some reason it was pretty entertaining, and maybe, if he didn’t really have to piss right now, he’d stay and watch Michael’s rag-doll body adjust comfortably around his own.

But he did.

So Jeremy slowly unbuckled Michael’s interlocked fingers individually to separate his hands. Like as if Jeremy was wearing a seatbelt, except this seatbelt had ten small buckles and a risk of waking your decade-long best friend up.

Though, with enough crafty poking and soft pulls, Jeremy found himself unfastened and freed without waking Michael up. He timidly snuck out from the bed and waltzed over to the bathroom.

Michael wouldn’t wake up for another fifteen minutes, so Jeremy ended up tidying the room.

It wasn’t much, just some little things. He put the top seal on the orange candle from yesterday, he kicked Michael’s scattered clothes into one pile by the door, cleaned up the items that had fallen out of his backpack (which he then set against the bedside ledge for support), and replugged in the laptop.

He’d also readjusted the askew trinkets on Michael’s desk, and while he was there (yeah, he probably wouldn’t admit to Michael he still does this), he might’ve started snooping.

It’s what Jeremy does, whether on accident (by meandering around on sheer, dim-witted curiousity) or on purpose. A small ritual when he’s left to his own devices at a friends’ house (which had also — when he was younger and staying over at an old friend’s house— had lead him to find suspicious looking toys in said-old friend’s parent’s bedroom. They don’t talk anymore).

He tried to forget that memory, because it kind of disgusted him. Besides, he hated that friend now and his kinky parents. Jeremy let the memory slide away and pulled on a small metal knob of a drawer.

In the first, there were scattered travel-sized packets of paint, two rulers (one half-shattered), a stack of lined paper, a notebook, and the weird, old, glass night-light emblazoned with the silhouette of a mythological Filipino dragon. Jeremy remembered it specifically. Michael always
had it lit in the corner of his room (even during the day) up until he was ten.

In the second drawer below that: a torn microphone pop-filter, some old backpack pins from Michael’s former obsessions (Weird Al and Marvel, mostly), a Magic the Gathering card (given by Jeremy for one of Michael’s birthdays), and the yearbook album for their graduating grade-eighth class.

One that Jeremy wasn’t in, since he’d been sick on photo day.

Michael had however taped a photo of he and Jeremy at the ceremony on graduation night (wearing rental suit-jackets and crinkled boutonnières very obviously pinned to their pockets) to the back of the cover.

Jeremy smiled. To him, he looked ugly in the photo compared to how he looked now. Obviously not much has changed, but his hairstyle has, and he’s taller, wider— and his acne isn’t so painfully red and obvious. A little voice of confidence warmed his heart.

To both their surprises, everyone they’d ask to sign their yearbook (regardless of whether or not he even knew them) did. The thick sheets of paper were scrawled in boxes filled with a wide range of eighth grade handwriting prowess.

Mostly just signatures, but there were a couple paragraphs.

Jeremy closed the book and tilted it to a snug straight edge in the corner.

He turned to the contents in the main, elongated drawer underneath Michael’s computer. A flimsy red notebook, neon highlighters, sticky notes, and a funny-looking glass fountain pen that had designs akin to the ones inside marbles.

Michael told Jeremy that his aunt bought it for him once, but after looking through Michael’s search history one day (for no particular reason, of course other than sheer and dim-witted curiosity), Jeremy figured that the intense list of Amazon searches proved otherwise. Considering Michael’s family hardly spoke English outside he and his parents, or used the word ‘wicked’ to describe a pen, or describe anything, ever.

But, Michael seemed a little ashamed about owning it, even if it looked kind of cool to Jeremy, so he never asked about it.

Jeremy’s eyes flitted away and he set the pen down.

Inside the three-ring binder housed notes on guitar, there were practice sheets, and different chords layouts. Michael’s formerly used all-capital lettering filled the pages with short dot-jot notes about different techniques.

He happily flipped through them, also watching how Michael’s handwriting evolved through grade-school, before his eyes drifted back into the drawer.

And he found what’d been hidden underneath the guitar notes: a palm-sized, thickly woven singular patch of fabric. On it? A rainbow.

Yeah, Jeremy didn’t want to make assumptions or ask questions, but he couldn’t deny that a huge fucking whim of force buzzed his mind. No discernible words, just—

Well, he wasn’t really sure.
Something about it made him feel gross.

Maybe not gross but definitely something. And that something was loud and bothersome and kind of suffocating.

Irrational ideations probably started pounding into his mind, but for some reason, Jeremy couldn’t hear anything. He only noticed by how his head started aching, and how his cheerful morning had withered into a deadpanned salience of Jeremy just looking at a dumb patch of fabric.

His fingers brushed over the threads. New; no threads poked out, and it was firm in the backbone.

Maybe Mrs Mell got him this. Pretty sure she likes rainbows, she has a rainbow dress. Or maybe Michael just likes them. They’re pretty, yeah.

But it wasn’t an actual rainbow. It didn’t have clouds looming either side of it and it wasn’t bending. It wasn’t just a clipart of a regular rainbow. It was rectangular, flat, with just the rainbow colours descending down it.

Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple.

A flag.

And for some reason, Jeremy couldn’t stop examining it, his hands curled overtop it and his eyes didn’t blink or move. Like he was going to find a loose fiber, like it was a suspected counterfeit purse and he was a New York fashion investigator, like it had some sort of undiscussed meaning.

It didn’t, right? Michael told him pretty much everything, right?

Right, like how he said a few days ago he wanted to decorate that new red hoodie of his with patches about things he cared about.

Jeremy’s stomach dropped, and fluttered, at the same time. The small, hopeful string in his chest was overturned by a wave of stomach-turning doubt and reproach.

Noise, noise, noise, oh God, there’s so much noise.

On one vile impulse, Jeremy threw the patch back underneath the binder, disgusted, and turned away.

He hated the flush of red in his face, the frisson of warmth in his chest. So he ignored it, and rotted in the sick feeling instead, spewing hateful maxims himself for that stupid flush of red in his cheeks, and the ugly frisson of warmth in his chest.

No more snooping. Because now, he felt a little anxious, and a little confused– scratch that, very confused, but he didn’t want to admit that. He wouldn’t admit that. That was fine, he’ll be fine.

He closed the three drawers, and swept himself away from the desk, swallowing his uncomfort.

Instead he twirled himself on his heels around different parts of Michael’s room; bored out of his mind because nope, he’s not going to think about that dumb patch again, but he didn’t have anything else to think about, either. He just wanted the pang in his stomach to loosen up.

On the bed (as Jeremy’s eyes would soon turn to for refuge), Michael’s cuddlebuddy had morphed from Jeremy to the pillow he’d been sleeping on during his absence. The boy’s legs wrapped around the end of it, and his head was nuzzled deep into the cushion.
The boy was murmuring what sounded like attempts at words, but it was extremely muffed by the thick coating of pillows covering his face.

Jeremy might’ve otherwise thought he was choking if his eyes weren’t tightly strewn shut and his arms weren’t petting the pillow delicately.

He smiled fakely, disgusted with himself, he thought this was cute earlier.

*And Jeremy still thought this is cute*, and that’s probably why he was so repulsed.

Jeremy plopped himself on the edge of the bed, and played with his phone instead of resorting back to the self-hating, anxious dialogue track he had playing way too often.

Though, it turned out to be less playing with his phone and more awkwardly adjusting into a comfortable position while also trying to fit into the small space that Michael and his prized pillow left as the no-cuddle zone.

When Michael moved, Jeremy would move to fit into the new, open space provided, like a weird game of *Tetris*, except with humans and a pillow Jeremy’s cold arms envied.

Cardigan? Nope, any loving embrace of the fabric Michael called ‘too scratchy’ was nowhere to be seen in his backpack, or on the floor, or anywhere.

Michael’s dad kept the house at a pristine 68°, and Jeremy’s own skin was *much* too thin to handle that low a temperature, but he couldn’t find the one he wore on the way over.

Which was typical, *everything* got lost in Michael’s house somehow. Jeremy hasn’t seen his old watch since the seventh grade.

It got to a point where Jeremy sunk to the floor and covered his body in the blanket Michael liked to use as a carpet. He wrapped it on and around his arms and head like a cowl, since Michael’s interlocked legs held the duvet hostage.

But hey, at least he forgot about that stupid patch and the stupid way it *didn’t* affect him, and how stupidly cute Michael wasn’t.

---

Michael would wake up to find Jeremy immersed in the preview of a high-school drama eBook when he peeked over the ledge of his bed.

And while the peaceful site of him reading was rare—and even if it might’ve sort of perhaps kinda made Michael’s heart soar a little bit when Jeremy smiled after reading over a cutesy paragraph—this was an *opportunity*.

The boy totally oblivious to him.

So, he did what any sensibly maniacal friend would. Poking his head down, and suddenly, very roughly, grabbing Jeremy’s arm like an undead zombie, risen from the grave.

And yes: the scare, the jump, the way Jeremy flusteredly closed his phone and panickedly double-checked to see if the screen was black or not, was definitely worth it.
So of course, Michael started laughing immediately, if he could keel over, he would, except his chest was hanging off the side of a bed.

A good start to the morning for Michael.

Jeremy eventually forgave him and went back to his happier spirits. The eBook on his phone he apparently was self-conscious about Michael seeing, because under the cover of his tilted hand, he bookmarked the page and closed the app.

So they talked, briefly, chilling while Michael sat in bed and Jeremy on the floor. Sometimes Michael would look down at Jeremy and smile.

Until well.

“O–Oh shit!” suddenly stammered Michael, his head shooting up from his phone’s clock.

Jeremy’s head perked upwards in interest, but Michael wasn’t looking at him anymore. Instead, he leapt off the bed, bustled over to his dresser, and scrambled with throwing clothes over his arm.

“What?” asked Jeremy, quite laxily too, crawling up onto the bed to replace Michael.

He cozied himself up in a cocoon of blankets.

Michael sighed frustratedly. “I forgot. I’m babysitting Ona today—” he grabbed a pair of sweatpants, then turned back to Jeremy.

His arm– the only free one– moved pretty dramatically. “if you wanna head out you can, but like, please stay Jesus you’re a lot better with her than me.”

Yeah, Michael panicked everytime had to babysit Ona. Jeremy could see why; the ostensibly cherub-looking girl was probably a demon, sent to Earth to terrorize the Mell’s.

“Sure, I’ll stay. I’m not exactly eager to leave, so.” Jeremy sighed happily, softly chortling as he flitted his watch between the beige ceiling and the half-clad boy scuttling about the room. It was weird to stare, so Jeremy every couple seconds took one dart to the wall, and back to Michael.

“Cool, cool, she’s like, probably going to be here soon, and I got to shower, so like, you know —“

Before Jeremy could object or ask questions, Michael dashed out the door, not bothering to close it.

The boy sighed, and started to shimmy out of his nest.

Admittedly, Jeremy was a little sleepy. The warm embrace of blankets surrounding every inch of his bare skin and hugging him tightly was as close to a loving girlfriend as Jeremy could get. He liked the feeling.

Though that didn’t really bother him much– the girlfriend part, not the having to leave the blanket part (he was very pissed about that, it was pretty cold in the house).

But for some reason, the aspiration of getting a girlfriend had worn off between the ninth and tenth grade. Maybe it was the realization that it wouldn’t happen that killed his spirits.

Whatever it was, he didn’t care. Instead, he meandered over to his backpack, and tugged on a new shirt and a pair of comfy black track pants.
Ona and her parents arrived less than five minutes after Jeremy heard the shower stop.

And Michael wasn’t out of the bathroom yet.

Though, when the doorbell rang, through the door, Jeremy heard him yell ‘Fuck’ pretty loudly.

“That’s not kid-friendly, Michael,” Jeremy commented on the other side when he walked past the door, shrugging as he made a beeline for the stairs.

As much as he hated seeing the condescending glare of older people (Ona wasn’t just gonna walk over here herself, she was six! And they didn’t live in the same neighbourhood, to Jeremy’s knowledge), the Mell’s were practically renown to be sweet and touchy.

Though this was pretty much based off Michael and Mrs Mell. Jeremy didn’t really know any others except maybe Mr Mell, who’d always been the quiet type.

But he opened the door for them anyways, knowing Michael was preoccupied with drying himself upstairs and— no, actually, he will not be thinking about that anymore about the fact that Michael was probably naked right now.

Instead, his eyes flitted to the little girl on the porch, Ona. Michael’s niece that was more of a little cousin because of their not-wide-enough age difference.

Accompanied by presumably her two parents, who stood either side of her. They were both around the same height, both similar shades of tan, and both shared some features with their daughter.

“Ah, pinsan, kumusta—“

The man who’d been talking, Ona’s father, looked down, to where Jeremy stood.

His face fell to some caliber of shock, not necessarily shock— but he looked slightly confused and disgruntled. Surprise, maybe, far from that relaxed eyes he was wearing before.

Ona’s mother stepped forward before the man could say anything more. She had dimples both sides of her cheeks and wore a pretty red lipcolour. One that complimented her beautifully tan skinton— oh, Jeremy will just admit it. There was something wrong with him, because he might’ve immediately thought of Michael’s new red sweater, and how it complimented his skintone so well.

“Oh, he, hello, young man. Uhm.” her face contorted to a puzzled expression, losing all the confidence she’d been wearing in one single sentence. She looked frantically to her husband— or boyfriend, or whatever their relationship was. They looked pretty young to be considered married parents.

Her face contorted and the features simply read ‘puzzled’. Jeremy would’ve almost laughed if not for the staunch, awkward air. "Ito ba ang tamang bahay?” she whispered.

Of course Jeremy didn’t understand a word of it, but he got the gist pretty easily.

“Uhm. Hi. I’m Michael’s friend, and he just got out of the shower so I decided to answer the door.” said Jeremy, though admittedly, he didn’t really understand the breadth of their English, so he spoke kind of robotically and rather slowly, adding to his already nervous impression.
“Ohm,” muttered the woman. Her hands were folded against either side of Ona’s shoulders tensely while the little girl stood quietly in front of her. “Yes, yes, sorry. I think we’ve seen you before—yes? Just not talked.”

Jeremy nodded his head with a weird, off-kilter grimace attached to it. “Yeah.”

“Michael’s going to be out pretty soon, I’m going to be babysitting with him tonight—"

Before Jeremy could say anything more to nervously explain the situation, the man stepped forward formidably. “Name?”

Jeremy swallowed, like he’d forgotten it, because the usual amicable smile that strangers usually carried dropped.

Which meant that of course, his stomach flipped over and crashed, losing his sense of credence.

Jeremy.

“Jeremy.”

“Ah, nice to meet you Jeremy.” he said, looking briefly away timidly. He seemed to recognize how uncomfortable the thin boy was by the way he shifted in place. “You, younger than Michael?”

So Jeremy shook his head, swallowing that hard ball of anxiety in his throat. “I mean— well, sort of. By a few months, but we’re in the same grade.” Jeremy backpedaled. Why couldn’t he just answer questions like a normal person?

He looked down a little to Ona, who’d been blinking weirdly at him, like morse code. Maybe she was just trying to be creepy, and if so, she was doing it right.

The man shrugged. “You look younger.”

Jeremy would’ve normally taken offense to comments like those, but with the man didn’t let loose of his eye contact. Jeremy’s breath hitched, and he could hardly find the words to say, so he just shrugged back and nervously fidgeted with his fingers in his jean pocket. “I guess.” he muttered.

He wasn’t really sure what they were waiting for, why they were letting talks die out in broad silence, why they were standing there all plasticky, like humans put on pause.

Oh, they’re probably waiting for Michael.

And thank God, because as Jeremy thought about it, thumping from the staircase behind registered in his earshot.

Jeremy turned behind him, watching the— the boy? The man? Oh God, he didn’t even know what to refer to Michael as with his new ‘Hey, I just hit puberty and I do not look like a boy anymore’ body. Whatever, watching him as he hastily slid down the stairs.

And thinking of Michael’s body again made his face heat up like it was the first day of sophomore year. Because hey, there was Michael, and even if he could generally ignore that fluttering in his stomach, he couldn’t stop thinking about him.

His skin was semi-damp, radiant, warm-toned and reflecting off the yellow ceiling lights against his neck, hands, and the lower half of his legs.

And his hair, Michael’s hair; Jeremy had discovered a newfound appreciation for it. It was
upturned, wavy, and roughly swept back, crisp and wet, and it looked messy but not too messy, long but still short and since when did Michael have a fade down his neck?

Oh, did Jeremy mention his face? Because maybe it was the lighting (but it definitely wasn’t because somehow he looked this way almost all the time), but some of his features struck pretty strong and were very noticeable and yeah he was pretty good-looking for a dude—

and for some reason that stupid rainbow patch popped back into Jeremy’s mind, and the mood stopped. He paused, and the admiration withered away, those thoughts turned guilty.

Instead, his heart whirled back into the bleak world of gross self-loathing because he was thinking Michael was attractive, and earlier he was thinking he was cute and—

Nevermind. Nevermind.

Nevermind, okay?

Jeremy shrugged off the nervous tendencies forcefully and let his eyes lower to the floor.

Which wasn’t his best decision, since looking down made him realize that yeah, he might have a semi-hard on right now.

That’s normal.

“Hey, don’t freak out my friend, idiots.” rapped Michael with a very lax, colloquial tone.

Passing Jeremy, Michael’s hand kind of roughly patted his shoulder. Jeremy tried to take this as a comforting gesture, but in the moment, he was repulsed by it, wincing and cowering his knees together. Luckily, Michael didn’t notice.

Or maybe he did, maybe he looked back at Jeremy, but Jeremy wouldn’t of known, because his head shot straight down shyly.

“Ah, pinsan! There you are, see we’re kind of in a rush.” His ‘uncle’ said, voice much lighter and looser than when he’d been talking to Jeremy.

Rush? What rush? You just spent five minutes interrogating me with your eyes. He thought indignantly.

He stood behind Michael pretty distantly, and let himself lean on one of the supporting beams that connected the foyer to the living room.

Michael’s aunt smiled dutifully. Notably, it wasn’t forced like it was with Jeremy, but he had to remember that Michael actually knew these people, they were his family. They were strangers to Jeremy. Of course they weren’t just going to be happy to see him, and he physically had to tell himself that, which rationally, is stupid.

Yeah that’s not how anxiety really worked, but it was at least a little manageable right now. He had other things to worry about.

“Right, anyway, what time will you be back at?”

The man shrugged. “Walo, malamang. Here’s a sixty, since I didn’t know you had uh, a jowa around, and you’ll probably need to pay for him too.” he said, dishing the money to Michael like it was nothing. The woman teetered her daughter’s feet over the threshold, urging her inside.
The only thing Jeremy could glean was the face Michael made to the late twenties looking man. One eye cocked up, the other glaring skeptically.

Jeremy assumed through Michael’s improv that the other man said something cheeky.

Ona bounced into the house confidently like the new warden of a detention centre.

And yeah, Jeremy did consider going into hiding for the next fifteen years, because the little girl was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

Luckily, she smiled widely as soon as she saw Jeremy sitting on the couch, and ran over to him.

She was tiny, with medium-length black, straight hair and a bright purple headband, a headband that didn’t even contain her hair, because she’d constantly pick it out. Ona loved the small sidepart that flowed over her forehead and tucked into her ear, and no matter how much pestering she got from her mother, it would *always* stay out of the headband’s grasp.

“Kuya Jeremy!” she estactically yelled, tugging Jeremy down to her level before hugging him happily.

The little girl hardly spoke English, and by no means did Jeremy speak Tagalog, so ‘kuya’ became one of the only words he understood, a nickname for Michael, which Ona later adopted to use for Jeremy too.

Michael explained its meaning when Ona first used it for him.

“Means like, older brother, or just really an honorific for an older male mentor-ish?” he’d said.

Jeremy got the gist, and even though he sort of thought it was weird for Ona to call him it, he let it slide no questions asked.

“Hi Ona,” Jeremy kneeled and let Ona’s smaller arm wrap around his thin waist.

He wouldn’t admit it to anyone that kids didn’t actually bother him that much. The only kids that annoyed him were the ones who were entitled and prissy.

And Ona wasn’t either. She just was *extremely* energetic.

She was also pretty smart for her age, from what Jeremy could hear, (even if it wasn’t in English) Ona was a pretty fluent speaker. She was confident in the way she spoke at least, and that was more than Jeremy could say about his own linguistic skills.

Jeremy Heere’s stutter probably had its own *Wikipedia* page by now. Cited a tenfold of times courtesy of Middleborough High bullies.

Michael entered the living room to the image of Jeremy and Ona embracing tightly. The soft grin that creased at the sight was only visible to Jeremy, and it proved that yeah.

Michael might actually be *perfect.*
The idea rotted out on its own while Jeremy tried to focus more on the eccentric cherub now bussing around the living room for the TV remote. Still, Jeremy’s eyes eschewed purposefully off Michael at every corner while they kneeled down to search underneath the couch cushions.

Michael found it, and frantically started clicking different buttons on the remote after powering on. Because the audio of a low saxophone solo and two actors in a softcore movie sex-scene started playing.

Jeremy keeled over in laughter, while with his body, he shielded Ona’s eyes.

With a flustered face, Michael changed the channel to something more PG and then started laughing himself. This is what he generally meant by when he said he was terrible with kids.

But to be fair, it wasn’t his fault, it was his mom’s fault that she loved to watch racy rom-coms and not change the channel when she retired the TV. At least now some kiddish cartoon plastered the screen, so Michael heaved in relief.

“Nice one.” Jeremy commented in a whisper, sliding out of Ona’s way and falling into the couch.

Ona didn’t seem to understand or care, but seeing how much they were laughing, and how Michael’s face had basically gone red, she started giggling too.

Fifteen minutes passed before Ona became disinterested in the cartoons. The episode hadn’t even finished yet, and she was completely bored out.

She ended up upside down on the back of the couch, sprawled out and unamused. “Kuya Mikey, meron ba kayong anomang pananda po?”

Jeremy was reminded about how he always found it cute how she referred to Michael always as Mikey. It was something Jeremy loved to tease him about after the first time they babysat together. But you prefer Micah, because that’s cuter.

“What? We just turned on the telebisyon, Ona.” Michael sighed. He had just relaxed comfortably against the couch, body sunken into the corner cushion. In his hands cradled Jeremy’s DS, which he and him passed to one another per round.

Jeremy chuckled as Michael feigned exasperation when Ona excitably looked to him and nodded her head. “Ito ay nasa ingles, kuya po.” His head fell back onto the arm of the couch. “Ugh,” he grumbled, petulantly.

Jeremy intervened, smiling as he kicked himself off the couch and gestured to Ona.

“I’ll get it, Michael.” he hummed. “What does she want?”

“Markers, she wants to draw, I guess.”

Ona nodded profusely. Jeremy was sure she just caught a headache.
Jeremy tapped Ona’s knee as he went to drowse through a bunch of drawers in the downstairs cabinet, and she flopped off the couch to follow him.

There had to be something in there, but most of the drawers he searched (Ona was a tad too short for the top drawers, so she just peeked over barely) were filled with antique photos that didn’t quite make the display, or tealight candle refills, or coupon cards.

“Mikey, where’re the markers? I don’t see anything.” Jeremy murmured, hunched over a dresser adorned with different family photos in different locations.

It reminded him of that neglected wall in his house. On it, were photos of Michael and his mom.

There were scrapped photos in empty albums, Jeremy surmised those were the ones between Michael and his dad. There were still maybe two that had the three of them (Michael’s dad included) posed in a family photo, but they all were centred through the mother-son bond.

Something Jeremy didn’t have anymore.

A pang in his heart struck him like a lightning bolt, so much so that he somehow ignored Michael’s heart chuckle, but he swallowed the shock down when he looked down to see Ona’s hopeful eyes carrying a large pencil case.

“I think I got ‘im, kuya Jeremy!”

She scampered over and jumped over the back of the couch to reach the small knapsack she’d brought. In it, as she was pulling out, were a few colouring books with the latest, simplified Disney princess designs.

“Gusto mo gumuhit kasama ko po?”

She pointed to Jeremy, and eagerly looked down at the stack of colouring books. God, he really wanted to understand her, but it was just gibberish and empty syllables to him.

Jeremy looked to Michael and murmured quizzically. “Oh, yeah. She asked if you want to draw with her.”

Michael seemed pretty indifferent of the fact they had a seven year old child to take care of; instead, he looked more interested in the DS, where his fingers lazily paddled with the buttons.

Realistically Jeremy didn’t know how to handle children, he could just tolerate them a little better than other people.

So he slid over to Michael’s corner of the couch, leaned his head along the backbone, and smiled lovingly.

“Micaah,” he singsonged innocuously, running his fingers up Michael’s shoulder delicately. “if you don’t help me with Ona I’m taking the money, and my DS, for myself.”

He snatched the DS from Michael and snapped it shut.

Michael turned to him and, instead of getting angry, a creepy, fake, affectionate smile creased his lips.

“Finee, but only for you, diddykins.”

Jeremy’s face crinkled at the nickname, and he dropped the act almost immediately. “Ew, you
chose *diddykins*, out of any endearing nickname? What’re you, a grandmother from the sixties?”

They shared a laugh, and Ona grumbled. She shot up and tugged on both their sleeves. "Anyway, help me out with Ona, I’m shit with kids." said Jeremy.

"Language." Michael warned, haphazardly; he was hardly serious in his tone.

“*Gumuhit kasama ko? Paki?*” drawled Ona, she was on her heels trying to drag the boys by the hem of their shirts (well, Jeremy’s cardigan, which he found under the covers after Michael left for a shower) to the other side of the couch, where markers and books were splayed out.

Michael almost never spoke Tagalog unless it was around his family, so it was alien when did. Jeremy has always wanted to ask for a list of swears or just everyday phrases, but he found it awkward.

“Err, *okey pino, ngunit kailangan mong linisin pagkatapos.*”

For someone who hardly practiced it outside his extended family and sometimes with his mom, Michael basically spoke fluently.

That is from what Jeremy could hear, frankly Michael could be speaking some mutant form of Taglish, butchering the language or he could even be making all of it up. But Jeremy didn’t know Tagalog, he just went off of Michael’s confidence.

Which wasn’t the best thing to do, Michael’s confidence was *very* misleading. He could probably do full-on presentations without knowing the topic and his voice would not break *once*, it was some magical prowess that Jeremy completely envied.

The ‘fake-it-to-you-make-it’ skill that Jeremy never was able to master.

Ona nodded, then flipped to a semi-finished page and fished in an array of pink markers for the correct dress colour for Rapunzel.

Michael kneeled over beside her, and started picking through the pinks with her, trying to colour-match the rest of the dress that was already coloured in.

Jeremy couldn’t help but smile a little bit, even if there was nothing merit smiling at. Something about it was perfect.

And maybe in that reverie, he forgot that randomly ruffling Michael’s hair was weird, but really, he couldn’t control his hand.

Jeremy froze, and his stomach churned with anxiety the moment Michael just *stopped moving*.

His hands, which’d been helping Ona colour the reptilian sidekick of Rapunzel dropped the marker and just froze; and his breathing, the pattern became irregular and it felt like he was only breathing occasionally, just for the sake of survival.

All Jeremy got was an intense, alien, and confused side-eye from Michael, one that might’ve been *angry*.

And then things just went back to normal, apparently.

Jeremy was standstill, not understanding how Michael just went back to talking to Ona so casually after that. His glare was so *different* than Michael’s typically friendly features, what was he even
feeling right now? What should Jeremy be feeling in return?

Jeremy tried to swallow down the guilty feeling of anxiety in his throat.

*It’s fine, it’s fine. Everything is fine, why are you making a big deal out of this?*

Michael’s foreign glance at him popped back in his mind.

Jeremy couldn’t swallow it down.

It hitched in his throat and he found himself unable to speak for a half-hour.

---

Somehow, Ona also stayed pretty silent for a little while.

The three of them circled the coffee table, scribbling colour onto different Disney illustrations in a peaceful vigil.

Ona’s face was plastered with a look of focus known only to kids and overgrown children who play video-games with their bestfriend in a basement, with one tongue creeping out and her eyebrows furrowed.

Of course, Michael was still thinking about how silent Jeremy was being, and why he’d been ruffling his hair earlier (while Michael was renown to be a touchy guy, Jeremy was pretty much the opposite).

He actually looked sickly, and while Michael tried not to look or stare at him, it was pretty difficult.

Even in his hands. They looked so awkward and fidgety, and Michael worried about Jeremy. Sure the thing earlier seemed a little off, and maybe that was what was bothering Jeremy, but that seemed far-fetched.

Yeah Jeremy overthunk interactions constantly, but never the ones with Michael. They were best friends, they were comfortable with each other, right?

Michael may have gotten a point where he started blaming himself for Jeremy’s behaviour. Maybe it was the way he looked at him, and how he didn’t say a word about it.

He scooted closer to Jeremy and placed his hand on Jeremy’s shoulder, patting him, trying to comfort him.

And he tried to think that maybe that worked, Jeremy’s tight clavicle seemed to loosen, but then he coughed fakely.

“I’m going to the washroom.” Jeremy affirmed, and not in his usual soft tone either. Something about that particular fact make Michael shudder.

Jeremy stood up and, without a second glance, retired from the living room.
Michael couldn’t help feeling bad about it, or worried, or insatiable, or gross, even. He should ask, right? He should go and comfort him, but Ona was here, and he maybe it wasn’t even his business anyways.

Jeremy was already pretty reclusive—minus yesterday night—about his emotions. Maybe right now Michael shouldn’t pester him about whatever was going on in that brain of his. It was probably something about his dad and him, and he probably needed time to work that out.

If it was important, he’d tell Michael. That’s what best friends do.

Hopefully yesterday showed Jeremy that he can trust Michael.

Best case scenario was that he just had to honestly go to the bathroom.

---

Whatever the case, Jeremy emerged not long after looking a little better.

It was basically a fact that he was doing better. For starters, he could actually look Michael in the eye, a vast improvement; and his face wasn’t grey-toned and sickly anymore.

There was also this small spring to his step, and maybe it shouldn’t be too much of an indicator, but Jeremy hardly ever walked like that unless he was either A) happy or B) trying to convey happiness.

Whatever it was, no one in the room really took it into consideration. Unlike Jeremy, whose eyes were essentially locked on Michael when he walked in (whilst he tried persistently to mute the noise in his head), Ona and Michael were both focused on their other leisures.

Drawing, basically.

“Kuya Mikey?” Ona started, and luckily that she did, since Jeremy hadn’t really taken his eyes off Michael since he entered the room. He needed a distraction.

So he went back to colouring in Elsa’s hair with an ill-fitting vibrant yellow shade and hummed quietly, listening in on the little girl.

The bathroom break had calmed his nerves enough. He washed his face with water, rubbed down his eyes and stretched, so he was feeling a little more rejuvenated.

Of course, his mind was still completely abuzz. But he couldn’t help that, he just tried to tune it out for now, and that somehow it was kind of working. “Yeah, Ona,” murmured Michael.

Michael seemed a little too focused on the colouring sheet. Of course he wanted to be the best in the stupidest things.

“Puwede ba tayong magbibilin ng pagkain now po?” Ona asked, and her voice had struggled a little and maybe she’d been looking for the words.

Whatever the case, Jeremy was still impressed with her linguistic skills. Even if he had no idea what she said.

Michael shrugged. “Do you want to eat, Jer?”
Michael’s voice was very lazy but kind of deep and kind of alluring. Cool. Oh, the focus is on Jeremy again. Cool.

Took him a few seconds to even process that.


God, words were hard.

“Mmk, I’m gonna go get my phone, ‘cos we don’t got a houseline anymore.” said Michael, and his voice simmered when he had to stand up.

A mutter.

“How the fuck are my shoulders *still* burning. It’s Sunday.”

Then he disappeared up into the hall.

Albeit, as soon as Michael left the room, Ona’s interest in Jeremy apparently peaked.

Something that was truly terrifying, how suddenly her eyes were wide, unmoving off Jeremy, and how her hands were still filling in the lines on the paper below.

And she was *squinting* at Jeremy, scrutinizing him with a deathly glare.

If he was honest, he was starting to sweat under the seven year old’s pressure, like he was suddenly the guest appearance on *Jeopardy!* and he *had* to get this question right.

Then her features turned smug. Well, as smug as an angel-faced little girl’s features could get.

Jeremy was, safe to say, ill-prepared for the curious insight of a first grader who didn’t exactly understand the concept of social filters.

So of course it was a kick to the chest when Ona leaned over cheekily, tilted her head with a faux smile, and inappositely asked:

“So uhm, do you *like* kuya Mikey?”

Sure, questions like these were to *be expected* when dealing with little kids. They have this complex where they think that *they* understand expansive human tendencies, like love.

And Ona was notably one of the most nosiest Mell’s, comparable to Jenna Rolan, the critically acclaimed gossip Queen of Middleborough High herself.

Ona loved to pretend she was a detective, apparently.

Unfortunately, this happened to be a case that was definitely, how do you say, ill-suited for Jeremy to answer. It blew the winds out of his sails.

*It shouldn’t, it shouldn’t, it’s just a dumb question. Just answer it Jeremy.*
Nothing. Nothing came from his lips, which was weird, considering his mouth was open as if he was trying to speak—and believe it, he definitely was trying but for some reason his voice wasn’t there.

And he sat there, with his mouth open, on pause. Like Jeremy was waiting for some diversion to come and distract Ona off the question, to save him and allow him to not answer it.

God damnit, why was it so hard to answer? Why didn’t he know how to answer it? A week ago he could’ve answered this without a second doubt.

Sometime in his waiting period, Jeremy might’ve recognized that no, nothing’s coming to save him, that he has to face this big scary question that for some reason was big and scary and he didn’t want to face it.

*Answer it, idiot. She’s waiting.*

“Uh, sure. We’re really close friends, have been for a while. I care a lot about him so yes, I like him.”

There was little conviction in his fast tone.

And he was ninety-six percent sure that Ona meant liking Michael in the *non-platonic* way, even if he was just trying to play it off otherwise. But by now Jeremy was just praying to some Hebrew prophet for refuge, that she wouldn’t ask anymore questions.

If there was some light somewhere in the skies, Ona wouldn’t even know that there was a non-platonic love. Jeremy did *not* know how to answer the question, even if the answer should’ve been so easy.

Why couldn’t he just answer it normally? Why couldn’t he just shrug it off?

*Fuck,* why was he overthinking it so much? Jeremy’s breath was wheezy and his face was definitely red.

And, oh *God,* if Michael walked in on Jeremy red-faced talking to his niece, he’d definitely be suspicious of something. Unlike Michael who was hardly ever flustered other than on a hot day in the school’s non-air conditioned gymnasium, Jeremy was whenever he got nervous.

And he didn’t really have an explanation for his wheezy excuse for breathing, either.

Then Jeremy realized Ona was giggling, which snapped him out of his reverie.

She was *laughing* at him, and why?

Her hands had basically stopped drawing by now. Besides, the ink cartridge in the $8 marker set was giving out. Streaky lines plastered down the page, but *Ona* didn’t care, she was *laughing* at Jeremy.

“So you do,” Ona said, matter-of-factly. Her face was pink with a youthful glow, and ear to ear a smile spread across her face. “You’re red kuya po.”

Confidence, confidence was important. If he was confident, then Ona would believe him.

“Me and Mikey are friends, Ona, I like him.”

His voice wavered weakly under the façade, but Ona seemed satisfied with his efforts. She smirked
and shrugged off Jeremy like a diva.

Jeremy’s head was unintelligible, and fuzzy with something that resembled adrenaline. Things were dizzy and confusing—room spinning like a tornado, waves crashing on him like a typhoon, throat dusty and dry like a drought. Jeremy felt like he just finished a five mile marathon.

Breathless, and for what? Because a little girl thought that he might like like his best friend?

Or because she knew that he might like like his best friend.

His heartbeat was loud, throbbing in the echo of his ears— so Jeremy sat there trying to swallow down the overwhelming noise, staring blankly at the wall.

Ona was working on her little ministrations, and maybe that’s how she didn’t realize how fucking winded Jeremy was.

Suddenly Jeremy had no appetite. That was fine.

He’d still order food and waste the money, because he’d much rather do that than admit that he doesn’t want to eat, than cause suspicion, than say Hey, maybe I should tell Michael I’m not feeling good right now, and that it’s because of him and everything about him and yesterday and today and now and just him and everything he does.

So he let Michael order him his usual from a pizza parlour, and by the time it got there, he mustered up the appetite to eat two and a half medium-sized slices.

He could usually eat five, and Michael definitely noticed too. But he just patted his back and smiled weakly at Jeremy. There was not much else he could do, anyways, Ona was at the Mell house and there was no time to cry, or play video-games, or smoke, or sleep.

Breathe, panic attack later.

That’s all Jeremy could say to himself.

Luckily, Jeremy Heere wouldn’t have to deal with those panic attacks until after Sunday.

Because he survived the night, the day— and the whatever.

Surprising, right? Jeremy thought it was impressive. Everything had just been such a suffocating rollercoaster of high highs and low lows that he was sure the minute he’d gotten home would just be a beeline to the bathroom to cry or maybe even throw up.

But no, he laid in his own bed, comfortable and desensitized; timidly playing with his own hair while the world around him nullified into nothingness.

Maybe he was just too tired to care.

After they’d eaten earlier that night, Ona surrendered to cartoons due to a ‘tummy-ache’, and even tried a few turns on Jeremy’s DS.
Lucky for them, Jeremy probably wouldn’t of been able to handle much more either way.

So up until the cousins came, the three of them mostly talked about Ona’s school life compared to Michael and Jeremy’s.

Things had gotten a little more settled, and gratefully so, Jeremy went home exhausted. So exhausted that he hardly talked to his dad, which, the exchange had just been a tender hug and two soft ‘Sorry’s’ in the living room. He was that exhausted.

That’s what an excitable seven year old will do to you, Jeremy supposed; because he couldn’t muster up the worry or the anxiety right now about any of the things that happened this weekend.

Things weren’t carefree, but they weren’t crushed and grounded with the harsh realities he dealt with, the constant whims of emotions and the thoughts and the everything ugly.

Everything was just numb and nullified. Fine, apparently, and Jeremy Heere would deal with it later.

Regrettably, he’d have to deal with it later.

Whenever that would be.

But Jeremy didn’t think about that. Jeremy bade goodbye to the weekend and surrendered to his mattress.

It’d been such a mess.

So goodnight, weekend, because you’ve made too many feelings that Jeremy shouldn’t be feeling, thoughts Jeremy shouldn’t be thinking— and right now, Jeremy wasn’t going to deal with them.

Chapter End Notes

again, just a note, i don't know if this is correct. this is just through translator use/running it by friends who speak tagalog. this is just what i'm trying to write haha.

Pinsan, kumusta
Cousin, hello (how are you)

Ito ba ang tamang bahay?
Is this the right house?

Walo, malamang
Eight, probably

Jowa
Boyfriend, partner

Meron ba kayong anomang pananda?
Do you have any markers?

Ito ay nasa ingles.
It is in English
Gusto mo gumuhit kasama ko?
Would you like to draw with me?

Gumuhit kasama ko? Paki?
Draw with me? Please?

Puwede ba tayong magbibilin ng pagkain
Can we order food
hi! i think this chapter is poorly written but i’ve said that at least twice now so i’ll shut up, anyway, here’s chapter six! i hope you enjoy it.

The “Whenever that would be” that Jeremy would have to deal with his ‘problems’ ended up being Wednesday.

Though, the only surprises were how long he lasted. Jeremy was actually able to get out of bed Monday (and Tuesday) morning.

Even more surprised how he got through with both Monday and Tuesday’s schooldays without breaking down. Everything should be so encumbering right now, everything should be destroying him.

So why wasn’t it?

To be fair, it was probably thanks to technique. An espoused technique Jeremy adopted during the divorce last year that got him through the days where he couldn’t just lay in bed.

Albeit, Jeremy wasn’t exactly trying to use it anymore. It was kind of a defense mechanism, a coping method, because while Jeremy knew he should face everything, he needed to nullify himself to be a functioning student, to be a functioning friend.

Maybe he was intentionally blocking out the weekend’s events from memory, maybe he actually wasn’t bothered by them, or maybe Michael’s relentless comfort was keeping Jeremy safe for now — but whatever it was, Jeremy couldn’t stop feeling like he was teetering on the edge, like a full-on nuclear mental meltdown was simply bound to happen.

And it probably was, because there was no way in hell that everything that happened on the weekend wouldn’t have its repercussions on the boy.

The boy who literally overthought every single interaction and doubted all of his own beliefs was not going go be let off easy, especially this time, with everything he’d felt and thought about over the course of Friday to Sunday.

He was trying to delay it for as long as possible, sure, but it wasn’t really like those LAWS and BARRIERS, because Jeremy wasn’t really cowering from it. He just needed to go to school, have a sub-par social life, play video-games (maybe that wasn’t necessary) and do homework. But the point was that Jeremy had a life he needed to live.

And productivity meant he didn’t exactly have time for panic attacks. So he tucked them away.

Though, his nerves were definitely frayed to all shit throughout the two days, which probably wasn’t healthy to live off of, but it seemed to make time pass quicker and his duties easier.
It was like he couldn’t feel temporarily, almost at all. Like he was looking through the eyes of Jeremy Heere as a passenger, not as the driver.

But, he went to school, he participated (somewhat, but that’s nothing new) in his classes, went home, played video-games, ran the couple of errands he had to, did the occasional homework question and slept.

When you couldn’t feel anything, everything seemed to just blend together at the end of the day. It was robotic, it was a routine, engraved in Jeremy’s mind.

Michael and him didn’t hang out afterschool either. It’d always been pretty awkward to on Monday or Tuesday, but especially that week. Michael had a small science project and Jeremy had two introduction summatives due (it was the second week since school started! Really?). Michael also switched to his father’s apartment for the week, so that basically meant creepy parental supervision and no fun if Jeremy went over.

Either way, Jeremy should’ve been grateful that Michael and him couldn’t hang out. Sure, at school, it was easier to remind himself that memories needed to be suppressed so he could operate, but alone with Michael? Jeremy feared that he might have a magical effect on him that allowed Jeremy to actually have emotions around him.

And Jeremy was super aware of his impending fate. Of course, there was no date or no accurate predictions for when his doomsday would come, but it definitely was. Definitely volatile and definitely ready to fire like a cannon at any moment too.

That prospect was terrifying, but Jeremy carried himself throughout the days restraining himself from thinking about it— hell, just thinking about anything related to the weekend might sound the alarm, so he made sure to be extra precautious.

His one-track mind was dedicated solely to analyzing situations and adapting to them. No room for those lingering thoughts of his, nope, not today.

Lunch period with Michael? Talk about the trailer you definitely didn’t just watch during the bathroom break you went on right after he mentioned it. Science lab partners with Richard Goranski? Let him ramble about that new workout regime he’d been working on and nod along to it like you understand proper diets and the names of every gym machine. Study hall? Play on your phone and don’t even bother eavesdropping on those shady sophomores very obviously making fun of your outfit across the atrium.

Monday and Tuesday just flew by. Simple as that. Life was painstakingly boring without emotion, but at least he was getting through with the days, right?

Right.

So the façade broke Wednesday. Jeremy’s world crashed and burned, and there was a single reason why.

Wednesday. A usual day, it started like any other from that week.
He woke up, feeling very neutral and kind of tired, for the bus at seven twenty. Waking up for the bus was typically more of a pain for him, but his dad was a lazy, pretty unreliable ride (and the awkwardness was sometimes just too much), so he bore through it.

A short shower, followed by extensive towel-drying and a visit to the Heere laundry room left Jeremy in a usual outfit, adorned with his usual backpack and of course, a usual cardigan (with thumbholes, very important) underneath the straps.

It was almost fall, right? So he had an excuse to wear it then.

Not like he didn’t wear his cardigans all throughout the Summer, despite his dad’s constant pestering about how it was way too hot (Jeremy could make his own decisions and he knows it's almost 90° out, thank you very much, Mr Heere).

To some extent he wore them because they looked good on him, to some extent it was because his arms constantly got cold, and to some extent it was because Jeremy was a little self-conscious about how skinny he was.

Well he was actually a lot more self-conscious than he’d like to admit.

So despite his dad’s regressive comments on his ill-seasoned fashion, Jeremy was happy with it.

He adopted a pastel wave-ish style during freshman year (courtesy to the passive aggressive comments from girls way out of Jeremy’s league about how he wore too many pullovers) and started really liking how cardigans looked over some light-coloured t-shirts.

Jeremy left the house four minutes before his bus showed up, wearing his signature look. His shirt, a pale red colour, paired with a brown cardigan overtop it, black slimfit jeans and matching socks. Underneath the apathy, he might’ve felt good about his outfit choice.

His morning crankiness dwindled away on the bus-ride to school, which was narrated by his guilty pleasure playlist, comprised of electro-swing and theatre songs.

The first class droned by smoothly too. English, and it was mainly just note-taking today (Mr Reyes couldn’t find a way to incorporate drama tableaux into a lecture about literacy strategies), so while that work was boring and long, an almost robotic Jeremy Heere didn’t mind it.

Besides, watching Mr Reyes dance around the class to write dot-jot notes in separate categories was entertaining enough for the morning.

Even if Mr Reyes’ flamboyant tone was definitely worth Jeremy’s attention, he kept one earbud in and tapped his fingers against the desk irregularly to the beat.

He felt calmer that way, mornings flew by quicker that way. And Mr Reyes wouldn’t notice, so he was in the clear, Jeremy sat at the back in the far right corner by the wall. He tugged his earbud underneath his shirt and used his arm to conceal the white wire.

His anxiety was apparently threadbare and tattered today, so beyond him and distant that he couldn’t even process it. Which was good, Jeremy supposed, it was just like Tuesday and just like Monday— no emotion, and no emotion was good for now.

So he proceeded through the decrepit History hallway when English ended on autopilot; even the thought of how awful gym class was going to be had yet to render with him.

Jeremy just kept his head low and his eyes away from the prowling wastrels at either side of the
halls. He needed to blend in with the throng of students going to the department, so he did.

He adapted. The only thing he really could do, because nothing else but his situations were resonating with him. Jeremy, the passenger in his own body now.

Or he was the passenger, up until Michael Mell showed up late for history class.

Which, on its own, was nothing new, he was always late for period two, because his first class was probably the farthest it possibly could be from the History department, in the West Wing, on the third floor.

But when he walked in— and he walked in, as expected, in his usual five-minutes-after-the-bell routine, as Mr Calum was just getting the projector to load— something about him caught Jeremy’s eye.

Something about him might’ve made every coping mechanism Jeremy had left crash.

Because there, in the doorway, was Michael Mell, clad in that same red hoodie he’s probably worn three times in the last week and a half. And it wasn’t unusual for him to be wearing it, that wasn’t what alarmed Jeremy so much.

On it. It was what was on it. On Michael’s left arm, just underneath his shoulder.

A rainbow patch.

Newly sewn into the red fabric, still firm and vibrant and definitely a fucking flag.

Yeah, that ‘something about him’ definitely made every coping mechanism Jeremy had left crash. It wasn’t a question anymore.

Because a memory— a repressed memory from Sunday,— recurred in Jeremy’s head, yelling bellicose in his ears.

Jeremy opening the main, elongated drawer on Michael’s desk, probing through his possessions—

And there the patch was, hidden underneath Michael’s guitar notes, and there the patch is, sewn onto Michael’s sweatshirt.

Jeremy didn’t realize he was holding his breath until Michael greeted him at their table, when all he could choke out was a “hi” before he started to silently heave for air. Just so he wouldn’t worry Michael.

Crazy that he even remembered to be cautious about concerning him, because Jeremy’s first thought process was probably what the fuck is happening.

But Jeremy couldn’t hear it well. He couldn’t hear anything well, he didn’t even know what was going on, what was happening, the room was spinning now wasn’t it?

Because everything started blending in together in one big crash of noise— and it all became noise — and holy fuck why is there so much noise?

The patch, Michael’s rainbow patch. Sunday and Saturday started flashing by with short snippets
of memories that Jeremy oh-so dearly wanted to repress.

Saturday: Michael’s house, Michael’s comfort, Michael’s pot, Michael’s smoke, Michael’s touch, Michael’s lips, Michael’s nicknames, Michael’s bed, Michael’s, Michael’s what?

Sunday: Michael’s house, Michael’s niece, Michael’s hair, Michael’s smile, Michael’s laugh, Michael’s Michael’s, Michael’s.

And Michael’s arm was on Jeremy, slung across his shoulders effortlessly— and why did it make his stomach flutter?

Jeremy felt repulsed by it, he wanted to fight and swat Michael’s hand away because of the sickly feeling growing in his stomach, because of the pallid look in his cheeks and the superenal rush down his spine. But he couldn’t muster up any power to. His limbs were unresponsive.

Jeremy was stuck in his head, and the smallest voice in his head was repeating the same, soft adage louder, and louder.

Michael’s.

Michael’s Jeremy.

I want to be Michael’s.

Jeremy felt like he wanted to throw up. Stomach overturned with disgust, a sour taste on his tongue, his mouth running dry—

“Jer? Jeeeremy, what’s up buddy?”

Oh, Michael was waving his other hand in front of Jeremy’s eyes while Mr Calum, in the background, rambled about the intricacies of ethnographic art.

Oh, Michael was pretty close to Jeremy, really fucking close actually. Like Saturday, when they were shotgunning, and how close, how close Michael’s smoke-sheltering lips were to his own.

Oh, Michael’s eyebrows were furrowed and his eyes were slightly squinting into the same focused mien– similar to when Jeremy stole glances at him when they played video-games together. The stolen glances that Jeremy kept looking back for.

“Oh, sorry. Blanked out I guess.” Jeremy excused, and maybe Michael noticed how constricted his throat was by his raspier voice.

It was so much more than that, everything was so much more than what he confessed, but he couldn’t tell Michael about it. Anyone but Michael.

Jeremy’s face was blanched— if not completely white, than either green because of the sickness in his stomach, or red for the fluster due to Michael’s hand grazing down his shoulder and his face being so close and so perfect and holy shit, did Jeremy mention how close he was?

Michael’s eyebrows were pressed together, creasing, and his eyes were boring into Jeremy regardless of whether or not he was trying to. He definitely looked worried, and a whim of guilt overtook Jeremy.

The boy suddenly drew back and straightened his posture, trying to A) keep his distance from
Michael, and B) shake off his nerves, his thoughts, and his feelings.

“You alright?” asked Michael.

In that soft voice of his, that nurturing, affectionate voice of his, the one he used Saturday, trying to comfort Jeremy while the latter sobbed in his lap. On one hand, it was loving and courteous, on the other, it was protective and had this gravelly undertone. A raw voice.

 Fuck, Jeremy, stop thinking of the weekend, stop it, stop it.

He wheezed trying to catch his choking breath.

And everytime a memory flashed by, Jeremy felt himself become a little sicker. A fast descent into a stomach-churning pit of disgust he soon called home.

Michael, wearing a rainbow patch. What were the odds he just didn’t know what it meant?

Okay. Jeremy was reaching at straws.

Sure Michael had outdated retro interests, but the iconic pride flag was everywhere. There was no way in hell he didn’t know, but God, Jeremy wanted to hold onto that last string. If that was gone, if Michael was openly wearing a pride flag intentionally, what would that mean? God, was Michael gay?

Jeremy wouldn’t know what to do, he wouldn’t know what to think. He never thought he was homophobic— truly! He believed everyone should have the right to love who they wanted and shouldn’t have to worry about judgement, but then why was Michael’s supposed pride flag bothering him?

Why was the idea of Michael being gay affecting Jeremy like this?

“Yeah, yeah—”

Turn on autopilot, please, for the love of God, turn on autopilot, and say something idiot! Stop thinking!

Jeremy faked a yawn. “just tired.” he excused, and hopefully his English-turned-Drama class paid off in his impromptu acting.

Though, inside was still no better than it’d been. In fact, Jeremy had to stop himself everytime his eyes wandered south of Michael’s eyes towards his shoulders.

He was freaking out.

Michael flashed him an uneasy smile— a universal smile for “Seriously, you alright, bro?” — and Jeremy realized he was probably freaking him out too.

Though, after Jeremy apparently shook off his inactivity again, Michael’s uneasy smile loosened. The smolder melted away and his features weakened— he still looked skeptical, but it was a little more neutral now.

“Anyway, what’s up? Did I miss anything?”

Jeremy shrugged; in all honesty he had no clue if Mr Calum said anything important, but judging how the Powerpoint presentation had just loaded onto the screen, he could make his assumptions.
“Nah, how’re you?”

He kept his voice as steady as he could, his hands as stable as he could, his eyes as dry as possible — there was no way in hell Jeremy Heere would cry in school.

You’re a man Jeremy, act like it.

Stupid thoughts, stupid stupid thoughts. Let him have emotions, yeah sure, that was healthy, but fuck, not right now!

“I’m doin’ pretty alright. I don’t think I’ll ever be on time for this class, but that’s okay,” Michael laxly said, and that same bright, confident grin replaced his suspicious countenance.

Jeremy weakly smiled back, but his eyes fell to Michael’s patch, and his grin fell too.

A repugnant taste washed over him, and swirled down into his empty pit of a stomach.

Don’t mention the patch, any patches, don’t bring attention to it, don’t think about it—

But his mouth just moved on its own.

“New patches I see?”

Through gritted teeth too, but Michael didn’t seem to notice.

Instead, Michael’s smile only grew wider, and Jeremy felt his knees go weak and his heart tremble. Of course, he lambasted himself for that. “Yup,”

While Mr Calum was distracted with the group of ‘dunces’ (Jeremy didn’t know what else to call them, they were some of the dumbest kids he knew, so the title was accurate) Michael threw out his formerly tucked-in chair out from underneath the desk.

Then suddenly, he opened up his wingspan and pointed to his chest proudly. “Pac-Man,”

Over his heart, and Jeremy hadn’t realized it was there before, was a yellow, 2D Pac-Man patch ironed onto the red fabric. Even that looked more aged and bendy than that stupid rainbow patch, Jeremy noted.

“Tri-force,” he shouldered his right arm in front of Jeremy, and slightly above his elbow was the golden Legend Of Zelda insignia in embroidery.

Just below that, as Michael’s finger pointed to, was a circular patch — coloured mostly white with a gold rim. On it were two jets with blue smoke following both of their trails. “Cadet squadron,” commented Michael.

Jeremy aimed his hand at the upper half of Michael’s arm. “What’s that one?” he asked.

Admittedly, most of Jeremy’s intrigue was faked, but he couldn’t help that.

Since his heart was still pounding, and his mind was still buzzing, and his fingers still twitching. Yeah, if it was any other day, if it was a week ago, before the weekend— when the thought of Michael being gay wasn’t apparently the end of the world — Jeremy would’ve been so excited to listen to Michael ramble about his patches.

What changed? Huh, Jeremy?
But so much was going on, and here was Jeremy stowing it all away and faking an okay persona.

And he had reasons to, they were at school, and how was Jeremy supposed to open up about the problem to Michael when Michael was the problem? Also, Jeremy didn’t even have it figured out yet himself, he shouldn’t feel obligated to tell Michael everything. He wasn’t ready.

Yet a gross, adrenal feeling in his body persisted. Getting words past his hitched breaths was almost impossible.

But Jeremy had to be a *functioning friend*, so he moved his focus on another rectangular flag above the two other patches on Michael’s right arm. “Filipino flag,” answered Michael, nudging his head to the patch at the top of his shoulder. Under it, there was a wide empty space. “The Ecuadorian patch hasn’t come in yet but I think I’m gonna put it there.”

Michael tucked his right arm back close to his side, and bared the other. Jeremy gulped.

There it was, up close. Were those a few loose threads on the patch now? Maybe, but that wasn’t the point, Jeremy felt tears prodding into his waterline, and the bright lights above them weren’t helping. He tried to seem interested, but he was *dying* inside.

“Pride, yanno?” said Michael, and his smile was *radiant*.

Jeremy couldn’t help realize how beautiful Michael’s smile was, too. Heat warmed his sallow face and—

*Stop it, stop it right now.*

Luckily, Jeremy choked back the question of “*Pride? For what?*” on his better judgement and instead, murmured along to Michael’s train of thought. He knew any more affirmation was probably going to *kill* him, any utterance of that *single* word would probably send him into shock right here, right now.

But even if Jeremy was stuck in his head, Michael was not. Michael lowered his finger to a Pokéball underneath that. “Course, *Pokémon.*”

Michael’s winsome ramblings would’ve otherwise made Jeremy flutter with giddiness, but right now, it only proved his point that he was *totally screwed*.

Under the classic Pokeball was a string of Pac-Man ghosts. All four of them, Blinky, Pinky, Inky, Clyde, and in between Pinky and Inky was a pair of 8-bit cherries from the video-game.

“I think I’m gonna put another underneath *this*, this uhm, cusp— yeah, that’s the word.” Michael muttered, alluding to the fabric at the end of the sleeve, but beneath the cufflink. He held up his arm and scrutinized the fabric for an ideal patch location. “Or on the end of the sweater.” he looked down to his stomach area.

He looked concentrated, and while much of what he was saying wasn’t resonating with Jeremy at all, him being concentrated was a good thing.

Michael busying himself was *great*, actually, because Jeremy was so utterly confused and dizzy and nauseous that all he could do was slowly nod.

His insides were on *fire*, everything was on fire, everything hurt, even breathing— which now was so shallow and airy— was painful.
Jeremy wasn’t sure how long he spent just staring at Michael, it could’ve been anywhere from five seconds to fifteen minutes without him noticing. But the latter boy eventually caught on, and his eyebrow cocked up when he finally turned to Jeremy.

“Buddy, do you need to go to the nurse? You— are you okay?”

Jeremy was having a *fucking* panic attack, and he really had no clue if he was supposed to answer honestly or lie anymore. Yeah sure, he didn’t want Michael to know what he was panicking about, but Jesus Christ, the room was suffocating him.

But he had to lie. Right now, Jeremy Heere had to lie. So he sucked it up, he straightened his back and exhaled loudly. It felt like there was a gash in his throat, like blood was reaching up into his mouth with the air.

“I’m alright, Micah, stop worrying. I accidentally watched like, an entire Netflix show last night, and I’m dummy tired.”

On top of everything that was happening, Jeremy was really grateful to have a friend who cared so much. Sure, it wasn’t so good now, when he was trying to hide the fact that he was freaking out, but the fact that Michael could figure out when he was having an anxiety attack sort of made him feel special.

Though Michael’s expression was still dubious. Jeremy sighed.

He looked down to his arm, which had reclaimed its position on Jeremy’s shoulder. “I’m not making you uncomfortable, right?”

*Yes, well, no. Is it you, or is it me?*

“No no, I promise, Michael. I’m just exhausted.”

Jeremy tried to laugh, it came out wobbly and forced. Luckily, Jeremy also strung his arm, albeit very reluctantly (Jeremy hardly broke the touch barrier either way, and this whole Michael situation *wasn’t* helping), around Michael’s shoulders too.

It drained him to be this close, he knew he shouldn’t be this close—

“Woah woah, I’ll believe you,” Michael chuckled, apparently apprehensive too about Jeremy’s sudden move. “but you know me, I get worried about you easily.”

Michael’s protectiveness, Michael’s Jeremy.

*Killing* him. This was destroying him on the inside. On the outside, Jeremy shuddered a little, but tried to bear through it.

*Panic later, panic later Jeremy.* He tried telling himself, and it was nearly futile. *Just get passed the bell.*

“I’ll believe you,” Michael chuckled, apparently apprehensive too about Jeremy’s sudden move. “but you know me, I get worried about you easily.”

Michael’s protectiveness, Michael’s Jeremy.

*Killing* him. This was destroying him on the inside. On the outside, Jeremy shuddered a little, but tried to bear through it.

*Panic later, panic later Jeremy.* He tried telling himself, and it was nearly futile. *Just get passed the bell.*

“Yeah, but it’s cool man. Anyway, what’s up?”

Something, he wasn’t sure what— maybe it was the internal maxims of motivation, maybe it was how Jeremy tried to focus on Mr Calum’s prattling about the Colonial period, or maybe how he tried to revert back to that unempathetic, robot Jeremy from earlier that morning— but whatever it was, Jeremy got through with History and talking to Michael without fainting.
By gym, he nearly wiped out all thoughts. Feelings still came and went, but his thoughts were alienated and distant. That eliminated half his problem.

Sickness was still admittedly, an issue, but he pushed through it. He was surprised he hadn’t passed out from exhaustion by the time he got back to the changeroom.

Without thoughts, things were easier. Jeremy couldn’t get stuck in his head that way, Jeremy couldn’t worsen his feelings if he wasn’t thinking about them.

A grateful Jeremy proceeded with living a school life, despite his gaping stomach and sugar-rushed (weird, he hadn’t even eaten today) heart. Because it was necessary.

Jeremy was changing back into his regular apparel in the lockerroom.

A usual gym-day, with the unknown names of boys either side of his hook probably talking about how awful burpees were (and they were, but Jeremy wasn’t going to say anything, no) or the latest rumour in their stupid bro-speak.

He tuned them out. He didn’t really care about ever contributing to the speculation factory that was end of gym period. Mostly because Jeremy still had pretty bad social tendencies, and because he didn’t really connect with the other boys anyways.

So right now, he focused on toweling down the sweat enamored parts of his body, and dug into his backpack for his deodorant.

Which… wasn’t there.

One thought stood out from the running, indiscernible buzz in Jeremy’s head.

*Oh shit, I forgot my deodorant.*

And that wouldn’t be a problem if Jeremy didn’t smell like ass. But he did, because he actually tried in gym class (there was no way in hell Jeremy was going to risk failing the course and having to retake it. Plus, he knew he should probably try and be healthier anyway), so his pits were reeking.

Thanks, burpees.

His hands trolled the bottom of his backpack, searching aimlessly in the dark depths because he *swore* he didn’t take it out during the weekend.

Oh, wait. Jeremy did. He took it out because his home stick of antiperspirant ran out on Friday, so he’d supplemented it.

Apparently, he forgot to put it back, too. With everything that happened during the weekend, Jeremy wasn’t surprised.

With one shaky breath, Jeremy waltzed over to the other side of the changeroom, where Michael’s hook was, to ask him for his.
And yeah, bad fucking idea for someone who might be having a sexuality crisis.

Because as Jeremy rounded the corner to his row, where Michael ‘arbitrarily’ picked (it was because of how close the outlet was. He charged his phone during gym class) to change everyday, Jeremy was greeted to a full-frontal view of Michael Mell not wearing a shirt.

And that totally not made Jeremy freak out, you know, seeing Michael there, standing with ruffled hair and sweat glistening skin, and realizing that puberty definitely did him well.

Like Jeremy had seen something obscene, his eyes took refuge to the ceiling, maybe his mouth elicited a Woah– man!, but hopefully nothing too obvious.

But it was only like that for a second, the shock wore off and Jeremy let his eyes slowly graze back onto Michael.

Who was chuckling. Because he's a prick.

“Like what you see, Heere?” he said through his smile— his dazzling smile, might Jeremy add. And Michael’s comment wasn’t making things better, wasn’t making the blush spread across his cheeks any lighter, but Jeremy laughed through it.

“Oh shut up man, just—” Jeremy swallowed, he tried not to let his eyes drift past Michael’s neck. “uhm, could I borrow your deodorant? I forgot mine.”

Michael shrugged, then reached in his backpack, retrieving an opaque red and white stick of Old Spice Denali. “Sure.”

Funny, Jeremy thought Michael hated most of the Old Spice scents. To be fair, Denali smelt kind of good. Like Michael, obviously, but now Jeremy knew what he used.

Jeremy stuck it underneath both his arms and lent it back to him.

Maybe for a second he paused there, looking at a shirtless Michael who patted himself down using his gym-shirt, put back on his glasses and ran his hand through his hair to style it back appropriately.

And maybe Jeremy was entranced by him, so enthralled that he wasn’t even thinking about how utterly disgusted he was with himself at that particular moment.

“Yo, gayboy, stop staring at ‘im.” A voice called behind Michael, with a face that peaked out from his side. An unrecognizable voice— and hardly recognizable face— but it was throaty and had a deep New England resonance. Ollie, a white kid with quaffed ombré brown-blonde hair.

Jeremy flinched. One sharp pang impaling his stomach, and his face flustered red. “Sorry.”

He was lucky that no one else besides the voice decided to catch on. Michael shot him an apologetic glance for Ollie’s remark, before Jeremy was already backed away from the aisle.

He scolded himself, because that was no, that was bad. Don’t do that, Jeremy. You can’t do that, Jeremy. Ollie's right.

Jeremy mustered up the ability to not repent on a shirtless Michael, to not repent on how it affected him, or whatever that meant. He ignored the deeper meaning and favoured rotting in his own embarrassment.
He returned to his hook disgraced, and under the guise of his Health notebook, Jeremy scrawled another tally under ‘Snotty Comment’ in his weekly Humiliation sheet, then shoved that back in his bag.

Jeremy walked with Michael to the second floor before they split up. Sure it was their routine, yeah, but an already emotionally unstable Jeremy Heere was basically walking on a tightrope at that point.

Their walk was silent today. Mostly silent, other than Michael, hot after gym, blowing wind in their faces using a flimsy notebook while he listened to music.

For Jeremy it wasn’t really quiet either. His heart throbbing in his ears was loud enough that he didn’t even register the weird looks the two always got in the hall. In fact, all Jeremy could notice was the side profile of Michael.

Michael, who’s hair bounced in the makeshift-fan’s current, Michael, who’s nape was covered in a thin layer of sweat, Michael, who isn’t talking and isn’t trying to be funny right now, but still is incredibly attractive, inside and out, somehow, to Jeremy.

It was like seeing Michael from a new perspective, and he spent the entire walk just staring him, Jeremy wasn’t sure if the red on his face was from gym anymore.

Something about Michael Mell made Jeremy want to scream, in a very, very good, very amazing, way. And when he smiled during a particularly monumental lyric, Jeremy’s mind, chest, heart and stomach, went fuzzy with bliss.

The morning had been a very up and down rollercoaster ride of emotions.

When they finally parted, for Jeremy to go to Honours Chemistry, and Michael to whatever his fourth was, the sick conscious reemerged in Jeremy.

And there was the self-hating dialogue, there was the empty feeling in his stomach, the full, stuffy feeling in his throat, the headache and the weak knees.

He traversed to his seating in the lab. Tables were set out in pairs of two for partners, and by the time Jeremy got there, Rich Goranski was already lazily twiddling with his phone with his legs kicked up on the desk.

Him and Rich, though they were wildly different and didn’t really connect on the same wavelength, started getting along since last week, when they were assigned each other. Their common interests? Not much, mostly just video-games actually, but they talked about whatever was going on.

Rich filled Jeremy in on the rumour mill that he was too much of a nobody to get insight on, while Jeremy was a great listener, and talked sometimes about the latest game trailer Rich might be interested in.

In all frankness, Jeremy was just grateful. Rich was in the mid-section of geek and jock, and he wasn’t made fun of for hanging around him.
Of course, they weren’t close-close. If Jeremy called them ‘friends’ out loud then Rich might give him a weird look, but they talked everyday and had each other’s numbers— though they only ever texted each other once, when Rich asked if Jeremy brought his textbook one day because he forgot his.

Still, apparently they were close enough that around ten minutes into the class (sometime around then, Jeremy was spaced out for the entirety of it), Rich tapped Jeremy’s shoulder.

“Hey man, you alright? You look like shit today.” said Rich in a whispery tone, while, on his visage, one eyebrow was cocked up.

Oh, great. So it was noticeable. Jeremy wasn’t even offended.

But for some reason, Jeremy couldn’t answer. He felt his hands and cheeks go cold, but he couldn’t speak. He just slowly nodded his head.

Of course, that made an already nosey Rich grow even more skeptical. His eyes flickered onto different features of Jeremy’s face.

“Uh-huh. I don’t buy it.” he said, and rightfully so. Jeremy was basically teeming with words ‘help me’. His pupils were more dilated than usual, the livelihood was sucked out of his now pale, leaden skin, his mouth was quivering and his hands hadn’t stopped shaking since class began.

Jeremy, at some point, just got too exhausted about warding off protective advances. He knew that yeah, they were just concerned and yeah, he should be grateful people actually cared enough to check up on him, but fuck, it was annoying sometimes. He didn’t know if was okay, alright?

He shut his eyes and collapsed onto the desk. He wasn’t unconscious, no, he didn’t pass out (though he definitely wanted that), but he just wanted to escape right now. Leave Rich’s scrutiny, leave the pressure of what the fuck’s happening with Michael, and forget.

Forget about school, about post-gym class Michael, about the weekend, about the patch.

So he wrapped his arms into a little nest and dug his head into it.

“Alright, yeah, if you’re not gonna do it for yourself, we’re going to the nurse man.” Rich said, his voice audible through the open crook in Jeremy’s elbows. His hand patted Jeremy’s back a few times, and since Rich was discernibly more muscular than him, the impact kind of hurt.

Rich stood up from his chair, waved to the teacher. A normal, arrogant Jeremy Heere would’ve fought against the notion, but he felt so weak and so smothered that he just complied.

“Hey, Mrs Lawson, Jeremy has to go to the nurse.”

The lady behind her desk just murmured, and didn’t even spare a glance as Rich dragged Jeremy out of the classroom.

Jeremy was so out of it that he didn’t care. He didn’t recognize how humiliating it was for him to need someone else, someone he barely knew, to stand up for him in front of the entire class. He just let Rich escort him down the hall.

Because really, Jeremy needed to get out of there. He needed a safe place right now. Even if that meant lending his life in the hands of occasional-bully-turned-acquaintance Rich Goranski.

So he took the wheel, leading Jeremy down to the main lobby of the school, not saying a word. His
brows furrowed to investigate the hallways everytime they rounded a corner, but he was probably just on the lookout for one of his goons.

Sure, he cared about Jeremy, but still, he didn’t want one of his popular friends to see him being so close to a residential nobody.

Hell, Rich made fun of Jeremy outside of Chemistry and hallway hangouts, and that’s just how it was. Jeremy accepted that Rich was climbing the ranks in Middleborough’s social hierarchy, and it was apart of the gig to bully losers.

Rich left Jeremy in the office after explaining to the secretary that he needed to see the nurse. On the way out though, he gave Jeremy a fistbump.

“Props man, and if you need me, just text me.” he’d said, while Jeremy mustered a smile. “Thanks again, Rich.”

Rich, slightly shorter than Jeremy, had winked, then, weirdly enough, patted the latter boy’s shoulder twice. “No problem man. Hey, if you’re not gonna take care of yourself, and your boyfriend’s not around either, who’s going to? Me baby, that’s right.”

Jeremy’s smile faltered, but Rich was already on his way out. Great, now Rich making jokes about he and Michael being gay— and being boyfriends.

How ludicrous, how ridiculous and how obscene. How dare Rich even say that? Huh?

Michael and Jeremy, gay. That was crazy, wasn’t it? Michael’s straight, and Jeremy’s straight. Just as it has always been, just how it will always be. No difference here, nope.

Michael, the different, but no so different Michael Mell’s sexuality didn’t change, and Jeremy wasn’t questioning his own at all.

Michael and Jeremy, boyfriends, pft. Good one! Rich!

Still, it made Jeremy a little sicker and a little weaker. He wiped off his inundated waterline and softly grinned at the school nurse, who’d just entered out of her office after a dismissing a tall junior back to her class.

The nurse was a middle-aged woman with short black hair tucked back in a ponytail, clad in lavender scrubs. She wore clear glasses and no makeup, other than maybe a flick of mascara (or maybe her eyelashes were just long?) and some oily lip balm.

She looked quizzically at Jeremy, but didn’t speak. With a ‘come hither’ signal by her hand, she ushered Jeremy into the room.

Which was a sub-par doctor’s office, to be expected for a highschool. It was small, had a bench, with cushioning and a streak of parchment down the centre. A cabinet, with a sink, and a MacBook Air plugged into an outlet on the countertop. There was also a small little supply closet with a broom peaking out.

“Sit,” The nurse said. Her voice was lined with an European accent, actually, it sounded more Eur-Asian. Maybe Uzbek.

Her fingernails, which were trimmed with bite marks, tapped the bench. Jeremy obliged to her probe.
The nurse ended up giving the go-ahead for Jeremy to be let home. She gave him a bag of ice wrapped in paper towel for his forehead, and also something over the counter to calm his stomach.

Ultimately, after Jeremy called home, Mr Heere did end up responding. Unsurprisingly, he wasn’t at work, and he reluctantly agreed to pick up Jeremy.

So at least he got to go home, and be alone with his thoughts.

Though, at that point, it was better than school.

Because at home, Jeremy wouldn’t have to deal with a stupidly perfect Michael Mell.
A week ago, Jeremy Heere would’ve ignored the soft fluttering in his heart whenever Michael made a witty remark or smiled. Now, it was all he could think about.

He wouldn’t acknowledge anything different: he wouldn’t of become sick with himself, or get a headache from running thoughts, or have to go home because of a stupid patch the boy wore on his sweater. He’d continue on with his day and not even think twice about it.

But ever since school started again? Things have been…different.

Specifically, Wednesday was different, and of course it was, because Wednesday had to be different. Jeremy couldn’t be let off once.

Everything hurt. Every bone, every limb, ached to move; and it was like a hot knife was twisting into his chest, like his throat was stuffed with cotton, and like the only sound he could hear was his heart pounding. His stomach? Filled with putty; and Jeremy’s eyes were swollen, and red, and his vision slightly blurred together all the things in the Heere household.

None the less, the fifteen year old quietly thanked his dad for the ride home (ignoring his questions), grabbed a cup of water, and trudged upstairs.

To his bedroom, his safe space— something he really fucking needed right now. Away from people, away from his dad, his school, away from Michael Mell. A name that, in the decade they’ve known each other, had become so secure and amicable. A name that now, a capricious Jeremy Heere tried not to think about.

Because he was dangerous to think about, because Michael lingered in the back of his thoughts like a predator stalking its prey, waiting for the best time to strike.

Here Jeremy was, a week and a half into sophomore year, flopped meekly against the covers of his bed after he’d slammed his door shut and shoved his backpack aside. There was so much noise in...
his head, so many voices, screaming different things—and he couldn’t listen to them all.

So he curled himself up, knees as close to his head as they could be, and tucked himself into a ball instead. Trying to numb himself just for a second, just so he could calm down, just until he could hear something past his throbbing heartbeat. Something that felt like tears pricked his eyes, but nothing came.

Jeremy had left about ten minutes before the lunch hour, and still, that gross feeling in his stomach persisted. Ever since History, when Jeremy crashed and burn because of what? Because of a stupid rainbow-coloured flag?

Because of a flag that represented homosexual pride?

Because that flag was on Michael’s hoodie?

This was so dumb, wasn’t it? This shouldn’t be bothering him so much—it didn’t bother him before, it never did, and it would’ve never bothered him before.

*Before what? What changed, Jeremy?*

Why was Michael’s sexuality such an emotional hotbed for him? Why did it matter that he wore a rainbow flag as one of his patches?

And why did it matter if Michael was gay or not? Why would it?

Jeremy didn’t think he was homophobic. At thirteen, he proudly proclaimed himself an ‘ally’ in his *tumblr* bio, and while, he never wanted to be gay, he’s always thought people who are should be equal. There was nothing wrong with being gay, Jeremy just, wasn’t.

And well, maybe he was a little homophobic, because he didn’t really see gay as normal. He’s always kind of… feared, being gay, because Jeremy’s already picked on enough, he’s already weird enough—and, and well, he just wanted to fit in.

But this wasn’t about Jeremy, and his desire for social acceptance, this was about Michael. So then what was the problem?

Jeremy hissed into the air, frustrated and annoyed. Bemused, because, because well, why did God hate him? The last week had been hell for Jeremy Heere—so many thoughts, so many feelings, unexpected and unravelling in some big stupid sitcom plot that Mrs Mell would probably watch.

Monday, last week, the first day back from summer vacation, and how excited Jeremy had been to just see Michael again, to have a friend to talk to and hang out with for the day after a long, drawling summer without him. He waited impatiently in English, trying to text Michael, so desperately wanting to see him.

And how Jeremy had felt when Michael walked into History class that day? Blissful, like the weight of anxiety and distress and boredom had just crumbled off his chest.

But then he’d recognize that so much had changed about Michael, that he was taller now, bigger now, more chiseled now, and Jeremy then—and Jeremy now—didn’t know how to feel about that.

He wrapped it up to not liking change, to not wanting Michael any different than how he’d been that year prior.

But maybe deep down, he knew that wasn’t it. Or, at least, not all of it.
Realizing that day, how Michael was— how Michael was... so much more attractive. How a pang had shot through Jeremy’s heart and how he suddenly started feeling light and weightless just hopelessly looking over all of Michael’s features, old and new.

Maybe *that* was the first time that Jeremy saw Michael in this new light, this new perspective—

Another memory surged through his head.

On Friday afterschool— the day that started off *that* weekend— how Michael and Jeremy kidded through the doors of the shopping complex, throwing nicknames back and forth at each other after a long week.

*Cute,* he’d called the name ‘Jer’.

And maybe it was just his voice or something, his now deeper, kind-of-sexy-but-apparently-no-one’s-gonna-talk-about-that-so-Jeremy-won’t-either voice calling something cute that alarmed Jeremy.

Maybe it was just how Michael called something cute that alarmed Jeremy. The smug tone paired with Michael’s pursed lips, and the small, electrifying flare in Jeremy’s spine as he defensively called him ‘Micah’ and playfully punched his arm.

Or maybe it was just because he wanted Michael to call him cute.

Either way, whenever Michael said the word ‘Jer’ since then, Jeremy flushes pink.

Before Jeremy could even remember the snide looks those two women gave him that day, Saturday barraged into his head.

Fighting with his dad, anger, yelling, crying, cold, abandoned.

But Jeremy had Michael then, and he had Michael now, and he’s always had Michael, no matter the circumstance.

Even when he didn't have his mom, even when he didn't have his dad.

Apparently, water's thicker than blood.

And Michael was somehow understanding when Jeremy panic texted him, asking to crash at his place so suddenly so late at night, but he obliged anyway, like he was a safety net working only to protect Jeremy.

He was *always* there to protect Jeremy.

But Michael couldn’t protect Jeremy against Michael.

Later that same night, Jeremy collapsed into his shoulder and sobbed his heart out. He told him everything, he let himself be *vulnerable,* he broke down those *LAWS* and *BARRIERS* so there’d be no more secrets.

And maybe that was what caused this frenzy of emotion. Maybe that night was what sparked this firework show.

But that night, Michael had been so supportive. Michael had comforted him through it all, he pet Jeremy’s hair, rubbed down his back, cried with him and didn’t let go— Michael wished he could take some of his pain away, and truly was disappointed that he couldn’t.
Jeremy didn’t want it any other way.

Even shotgunning that night, through laden eyelids and seeing Michael’s face so close to his own, seeing his lips so close to his own. So tantalizingly close.

He didn’t want it any other way.

Fuck. He’s really close, isn’t he? He’d thought through hazy smoke, and knowing how Michael’s mouth was just an inch from his own, sweat was building up on the back of his neck. Because it wasn’t normal to be for friends to be this close, and it wasn’t normal to want to be even closer.

Saturday night was when Jeremy might’ve realized that how he felt about Michael wasn’t norma—

No, no. Stop.

Jeremy coughed, and the breath hitched in his throat came out painful and raspy, but he didn’t have time to catch it.

Because Sunday morning flashed in his head, sweeping him away from reality on a brigade of thoughts.

Waking up with Michael’s arms cuddled around his waist, sneaking out of his grip, snooping around the boy’s room and yup, finding Michael’s patch— that damned patch, but this time, thinking about it didn’t make Jeremy sick.

It actually kind of made him feel a twinge of painful bliss in his chest. Inside, it burned slowly like an ember, much like on his face, where his cheeks went hot; an emotion muddled and confused.

But then there were memories of them together baby-sitting Ona later that day, and he remembered fawning over his looks when he drowsed down the stairs. And Sunday was bad, but Sunday was good too, because he at least got to calm down from the argument with his dad by spending the day with Michael, and that adorable seven year old niece of his.

All throughout the week, there were the little things, too.

Like the way Jeremy noticed himself looking way too intently when Michael licked his lips, or how he’d haplessly graze his eyes over to Michael during class, or how whenever Michael whispered in Jeremy’s ear, trying to keep quiet, he’d get goosebumps, and go a little pink.

How he got disappointed when Michael said told him, ‘I don’t do anything a best best friend wouldn’t do,’ Saturday night, and how Jeremy’s constantly been ignoring the sparks in his stomach when Michael gets too close.

Even today, how he stood and stared at Michael in the dressing room, how his eyes scaled his musculature: every curve, every edge and every vein.

Jeremy swallowed heavily, his face got a little warmer.

Maybe he really wasn’t thinking of Michael normally, maybe he wasn’t feeling normal feelings about him either.

Jeremy forced his eyes shut. IT HURTS to think about, everything hurt.

Vrrr, vrrr.

Jeremy’s phone was ringing, he realized behind bleary eyes and the static in his head. It was under
the thick covering of a pillow, so the vibration was mostly muffled.

Somehow, he paused everything, and begrudgingly grabbed his phone.

**INCOMING CALL**

*michael mellon*

609-418-1883

*Oh, and he’s worried about you again. He’s always worried about you, isn’t he? He makes you feel special, doesn’t he?*

Just like that, intense fireworks lit in Jeremy’s chest, and that superrenal feeling recurred down his spine, and like that, there it is;

*an epiphany.*

Jeremy shuddered, because suddenly, that same deadweight pressing his chest wasn’t there anymore.

Just like that, everything became a little clearer.

Just like that, his painful truth became a little clearer.

*Oh shit. Jeremy thought, and feelings, feelings, loud and big flooded his body, and his pallid face ran red with anguish, tears welling in his eyed because it’s you.*

*Oh it can’t be, it can’t be you.*

Michael, Michael, Michael *fucking* Mell.

*But of course it’s you, it’s always you.*

The one exception to all of Jeremy’s rules.

He couldn’t just let it ring, he couldn’t leave Michael more worried than he probably already was. So, Jeremy wiped the tears off his sultry cheeks and swiped to answer.

“H-hey, Mikey,” Jeremy said hesitantly into the phone.

He timidly curled it in between his shoulder, head, and pillow securely while he let his hands twiddle with each other, needing some sort of stim to distract himself.

On the other end, what sounded like a gasp reached through the tiny speaker. “Jeremy! Thank God man, I’ve been tryna reach you like crazy, you aite man?”

A clatter in the background told Jeremy that yeah, he definitely just ditched his friend during Michael’s *least* favourite time of the day. Lunch hour.

Because he had to sit with hundreds of other grimy students. And now he’s alone too, freaking out about Jeremy because he couldn’t just send Michael a ‘Went home early because I feel sick’ text.
“Yeah, I’—I’m good. I just uhm, I started feeling really sick during Chem, so I just, just erm, went home.” Again, it was so much more than that, but he couldn’t tell Michael anything. Anyone but Michael.

Jeremy tried his hardest to hold back sobs, and he was semi-successful. He didn’t hic or whine, but tears were streaming down his face. Emotions volleyed like a pepper of bullets into his chest, into his heart, and blood spilled out like the truth Jeremy couldn’t deny anymore.

*Why does it have to be you?*

Michael sighed from the other end. “I freaked out man. Almost called the police.” he chuckled, but it's evident that it was pretty forced, his voice sounded strained. Underneath everything else, Jeremy felt guilty.

“I—I’m sorry for leaving you alone for lunch, I— I should’ve messaged you or something. I just forgot, my head’s been killing.” said Jeremy softly into the receiver.

No matter how quiet and delicate his voice was, everything inside was screaming, trying to get some message past Jeremy’s hitched breaths and quiet sobs.

*I think that I might like you, and that I might you too much, and in a not bro’s sort of way and I hate that I might.*

**Please, save me. Tell me that you don’t like me, tell me you hate me, something, because I don’t know how to like you this way.**

Michael cooed, obviously trying to lighten Jeremy’s shaky mood. “Aw, man, don’t worry about it. Do you need me to come over after school? I could skip seventh if you need.”

**Please, stop being so perfect. Stop caring about me so much. You’re killing me because I don’t know what to do with these feelings.**

His mouth moved, unaligned from his brain. “First off, you’ve already skipped that class twice last week, so don’t do that. But uhm, if you wanna drop by sometime tonight you can. W–we could try that new GTA mod.”

Jeremy’s body was on *fire*, everything was on fire because Michael Mell, you’re ruining his life and you don’t even know it— but Jeremy couldn’t concern Michael anymore than he already has. “I’d love to man. Anyway, I’m gonna try n’walk over to Seven Eleven for a pitstop by the time fifth starts.” Michael said, and Jeremy could hear in the background the cafeteria’s noise fading out.

“Yuh, t-thank you, Micah. Buh bye.” Jeremy singsonged, or well, whatever his blown out vocal chords could muster to be semi-reminiscent of a singsongey tune.

“So, uh, I hope you feel better Jer. Seriously, you looked bad today, in the least offensive way possible. A-nyway, see ya.”

Tingles, because nicknames sounded so sweet off Michael’s tongue. He was a natural at it, and hearing him say ‘Jer’ made a smile crack through the ruins of Jeremy Heere. *But he hated that smile, because that smile was just one of the things he loved about Michael.*

He reeled in Michael’s caring— but *platonic* gestures, which had caring, but *platonic* intentions. Jeremy wished the words ‘Michael’ and ‘platonic’ didn't have to be in the same sentence.
Fuck, Jeremy didn’t just think that, did he?

But Michael hung up, and while Jeremy exhaled loudly in relief, now it was just him, and his thoughts, and his ceiling again.

And really, Michael was still there, in redolent unintentional memories that flashed by Jeremy’s mind, in fantasies that swept him off his feet, in chimeras that were a little too racy for friends to be doing.

So maybe Jeremy was falling, and maybe he was falling hard.

But the thing is, Jeremy didn’t want to like Michael. That… that was gay, and Jeremy isn’t gay. He didn’t want to think of Michael as cute or charismatic or attractive or, or well—fuck, just say it! Or hot!

Michael should not be hot to Jeremy.

Michael was none of those things, Michael was never any of those things. He was, always have been, and always will be Jeremy’s best friend, so there is no way in hell that Jeremy thinks more of him than that.

Nothing more than that. Nothing more than a best friend.

Because sure, while Michael was different now— and last summer and puberty made him look all new sorts of ways— he was also the not so different Michael Mell, the same Michael Mell who Jeremy befriended more than decade ago in preschool.

Who actually laughed at Jeremy’s stupid jokes, who lended Jeremy his skateboard so he could try and impress a girl when they were twelve, who brought up that he was “questioning his sexuality” when they were thirteen, who stayed up way too late almost every night last summer just so he could text Jeremy with the time difference and provide him some company, who was one of the only people that wanted to hang out with him.

Who he didn’t have feelings for, for the record. Because Jeremy’s your normal straight guy.

No matter how many snide jokes he got from kids more popular than he was, no matter how many weird glances they got in the hallways or the awkward questions about Michael from his dad (who also assumed they were dating twice)— Jeremy didn’t have feelings for him.

Of course he didn’t have feelings for Michael, hell, what would that even mean? He wouldn’t crush on his best friend! His probably also straight best friend that knowingly wore a gay Pride patch to school.

That Jeremy wasn’t thinking about in any other way besides platonically.

That wouldn’t even be that outrageous if he wasn’t thinking about him platonically.

That wouldn’t even be ridiculous to think that maybe they could be a couple.

And maybe it wasn’t even absurd or crazy anymore to want to be Michael’s Jeremy.

God, Jeremy really liked Michael, didn’t he?

He rolled over to be stomach-first into the bed, grabbed fistfuls of his pillow, and screamed into it.

Because here Jeremy was, trying to bend facts. Trying to tell himself that this all normal, this is all
platonic, you don’t like Michael that way and you shouldn’t be worried about any change, because everything’s the same!

You’re straight, and it’s okay sometimes if Michael makes you feel tingly, if you get lost in his eyes or want to hold his hand. It’s what friends do, and nothing has changed and you’re not gay for wanting more.

Here Jeremy was, trying to reason with himself (because God, what would that do to their friendship?), trying to normalize his thoughts (because God, Jeremy so desperately wants to be normal), trying to deny any change (because God, he doesn’t want things to be different), and trying to give any other answer than I think I love Michael.

(Because God, how was Jeremy supposed to cope with those feelings?)

But the reality was different, and even if it was painful, Jeremy would be denying himself if he said otherwise.

And he knew, too.

He knew, a friend shouldn’t make Jeremy feel this way—a friend’s giggle shouldn’t make Jeremy’s heart soar, a friend’s sex jokes shouldn’t make Jeremy flustered and uncomfortably warm, a friend’s voice shouldn’t make Jeremy squeamish, and a friend shouldn’t make him feel like the happiest boy on Earth.

Facing it was so ridiculously hard for him, but he’s been steering a sailboat, trying to fight a storm. There was no other way out, no escape or refuge to hide in, it was him against a tsunami in an ocean of feelings, where acceptance seemed like both a risk and a relief.

It didn’t matter how confused Jeremy was, or vulnerable, or scared. It didn’t matter what this meant for his sexuality. It didn’t matter what this meant for their friendship. It didn’t matter how hard it was to admit. It didn’t matter if nothing changed or if everything changed because of it.

Nothing mattered right now, he had to push that all aside: Jeremy couldn’t blur the line between reality and fantasy, he couldn’t lie like this anymore.

So he just had to admit that, yeah:

I really do like him.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading and supporting this fic, i really appreciate this fic and the response i’ve gotten to it!

on this particular chapter i’d really like to ask for some feedback, because i’m not really confident in it at all? is it good? please give feedback i’m starvin

also please realize that these do not reflect my personal views on the LGBT community. i incorporated this to both stay true to jeremy’s canon character (who’s top desire is to be popular, and therefore, would have to fit into that character archetype), to add more to jeremy’s anxiety (it’s a common thing for people with chronic anxiety to not want to be different), and for plot.
thank you for everything again (:}
Jeremy’s taken a pretty paradoxical impression to this newfound crush he had on Michael Mell.

Of course, it shouldn’t be a surprise that this would happen. They’ve known each other all their lives and he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t thought about it before, but here, in reality? It was so hard to ignore, constantly pestering him with fast heartbeats (seriously, it was like he was constantly in Phys Ed.), and florid faces.

It was even harder to ignore because Jeremy and Michael were best, best friends, and like best, best friends did, they talked a lot, and spent a lot of time together. They had three classes, basically four if you count Study Hall, together, spent Lunch at the same table, hung out afterschool at least two days a week, and even in the classes they didn’t share, they texted like crazy.

Michael was admittedly, a little hard to avoid, and Jeremy still didn’t know how he felt about that; if being so close to him was good or bad.

Mainly because well, Jeremy loved Michael, not just as his crush but first, as his friend, so of course he wanted to hang out with him as much as possible, but on the other hand, he was also Jeremy’s crush, and it was kind of killing him.

Hell, he didn’t know how he felt about Michael generally anymore. Over the couple of days after Wednesday, he learned to— somehow— come to terms with the idea, even if it still made him flinch to think about.

Him, Jeremy Heere having a crush on a boy first and foremost— and yeah, he still didn’t even know what to call himself there, either— but on Michael? Someone he saw everyday, someone who he’d probably die for, someone he knew so well?

Of course it was on Michael, it had to be on Michael, didn’t it? The one exception to all his rules— and apparently his sexuality, too. There was no easy routes for Jeremy, no cheats or fast-passes, because sure, if it was on some distant jock or a celebrity, he’d get over it pretty quickly, but nope.

Couldn’t do that. So Jeremy just had to stow it away as best he could, because he wasn’t about to just lose Michael altogether. His quick solution was to hide it, because eventually, it’d die off on its own.

No matter how disappointing that was, Jeremy lived with it, because there was no way in hell he’d put everything on the line just so he could get clearance on a stupid crush.

Like he mentioned, Jeremy also didn’t know what he was anymore, sexually. He always said he was straight, always thought he was straight, and always wanted to be straight—

But this whole Michael thing suddenly upheaved everything he thought he knew about himself, and Jeremy was more unsure now. Sure, he’s considered labelling himself gay, but that was immediately shot down by twenty lonely minutes on his computer late at night.

He settled for the term bisexual, since it seemed a lot more his speed, but it still wasn’t a
comfortable fit. Jeremy didn’t fawn after boys so casually like he would girls— he was just that one exception.

Still it was hard to actually tell himself he was bisexual, and he’d never tell anyone else about it either, because it’s hard not to want to fit in, it’s hard to not be normal. Normality was acceptance, acceptance was popularity, popularity was friends.

And straight? To Jeremy, that was the normal. Everyone was straight, because people got made fun of for being gay, because gay stood out, and all Jeremy’s ever wanted in life was to blend in.

He might want to rethink that. Sure, he’s always supported gay rights, but that was always under the assumption that it was someone else. Jeremy didn’t know how to not be ‘normal’, but calling straight the normal seemed like a pretty toxic ideology now.

Because him still beat himself up for thinking the thoughts he did, and feeling the feelings he did. Rationally, he probably shouldn’t do that.

So Jeremy stayed up really late now, well, it wasn’t like he could sleep with everything new and fresh in his mind anyways, but in attempts to figure himself out, he spent long periods around two in the morning where he just thought about everything.

Two in the morning tended to be the prime time frame where Jeremy was horny, but too lazy to jack off, which for some reason, made the most philosophical of moods. Probably the only time of the day where Jeremy could think about everything and not hyperventilate.

Because the thing is, Jeremy doesn’t want to like Michael, but he really does, and he hates that he does, but also he loves that he does. Because Michael makes Jeremy feel things he’s never felt before, and he loves that about Michael. He loves so many things about Michael.

That in itself was hard to come to terms with, because it was hard to risk losing him after eleven years together, but he learned how to shakily admit that he had a crush on Michael.

Things would still just be so much easier if he could tuck all the feelings away and repress them so far back that they’d never see the light of day again.

So Jeremy tried to act like nothing was different between them, and even he was impressed by his own acting skills.

Especially because he somehow managed to plaster on a shy smile and laugh hushedly when they have another assembly on Friday, when Michael’s hot breath whispered jokes in his ear while his hand was on his shoulders, while not noticing how Jeremy’s neck hairs are standing up straight and how Jeremy was bursting out of his skin.

Friday’s assembly, Jeremy had to choke out his own jokes instead of being able to let them bounce out of his mouth in a fluid conversation like they’d normally have.

(Luckily, Michael didn’t question him when he squeezed his knees together and tugged down his shirt. At some point in the assembly, it just got too much, and as shameful as it was, Michael didn’t notice, which was ultimately, most important.)

Somehow, Michael had the power to make Jeremy feel almost any emotion, and he typically used that power to make him feel every emotion, all at once.

Maybe he didn’t realize it, but Michael being a ‘touchy-feely’ person was physically killing Jeremy. He squeaked everytime Michael slung his arm around him or leaned onto his shoulder.
It was kind of funny, he always saw Michael as a perceptive person because he’d always watch out for Jeremy’s oncoming anxiety attacks or signs that he was uncomfortable no matter where they were. But while Jeremy thought he was so obvious by the way he’d accidentally stare (probably with heart eyes, knowing him) at Michael for minutes on end, he never once brought it up.

What’s even more funny was when Michael mistook Jeremy’s stupid, lovestruck tendencies for his anxiety symptoms, and would then accidentally make things worse by trying to soothe Jeremy with hand-holding or other forms of physical comfort. A toxic ouroboros.

Hah, yeah, God loved to fuck with Jeremy’s life. It wasn’t even a surprise anymore how screwed he was, because it’s become apparent how he just can’t win at life.

Jeremy was just grateful Michael didn’t know. How he didn’t realize by now was breathtaking.

Speaking of breathtaking things, Michael himself was breathtaking.

He probably wasn’t trying to be, considering he wasn’t doing anything special. They were back in his basement, Saturday afternoon (frankly Jeremy was surprised he survived the week), playing video-games, and there wasn’t anything out of the blue or different about today.

It was just, well.

Jeremy’s noticed recently how distracted he got by Michael sometimes. Truthfully, he didn’t mean to, and it wasn’t incredibly often, but it did happen, and right now was just one of those moments.

Because Michael looked really handsome when he focused. Of course, he always looked handsome, Jeremy knew that really well by the end of the week, but there was something about Michael furrowing his brow and having this look of concentration square in the eyes that made him look, well, intense. His mouth was slightly agape, probably because he didn’t remember to close it, and the corners of his lips were curled in anticipation. Video-games were one of the only things Michael took seriously sometimes, and some levels required some attention.

Meanwhile, Jeremy’s character hadn’t moved for a good thirty seconds, or maybe a minute, or maybe two. He wasn’t sure, because time felt like it’d stopped up until he watched Michael bare gritted teeth, and snarl at him. “Jeremy, what the fuck! We’re in game, fucking focus!”

His face turned red, and in meager attempts to forget that it was kind of really fucking hot when Michael got competitive, he flitted back to the screen, shook his head and scolded himself.

That wasn’t platonic, Jeremy.

So he batted off the zombies that’d surrounded him and ran off into a different corner of the map, leaking a few sweat droplets down the back of his neck because Jeremy could get competitive too, you know.

Actually, it was because for some reason, he felt a whole lot warmer than he did a few minutes ago, thanks Michael.

But Jeremy’s fuck-up didn’t go without consequence. By the end of the round, the zombies Jeremy had failed to kill off during his escapade ended up swarming Michael, who he basically abandoned on the opposite end of the map to save his own life. So, Michael got “downed”, he couldn’t revive him. Jeremy Heere, perk-less, and still dumbfounded because did he really just stare at Michael and throw the game?

Yes apparently, because despite his best efforts, he couldn’t outsmart a constant horde. The level
needed Jeremy’s undivided attention, and well, he obviously didn’t live up to it.

A red *GAME OVER* overlay plastered a scenic shot of the map like the end credits on a movie.

Safe to say, Michael wasn’t too happy with Jeremy. Sure he never held grudges, but they’ve been trying their hands at this level for days now, and they were *so* close. Jeremy had lost focus at the worst time.

So of course, he was a little angry. His head instantly twisted to Jeremy the second the boy died with a look of ‘*Really?’* teeming through his features.

It was kind of hot, but Jeremy could push that aside, and he *had* to push that aside. Michael mattered more than those dumb, intrusive thoughts.

“Jeremy! What the fuck?” he asked, and there, just underneath the part in Michael’s hair, was that awry vein that sometimes popped out when he got angry. It’d been like that since a skating accident when they were thirteen (that also ended his skating career, thanks Mrs Mell for stopping what could’ve been the next Tony Hawk).

Jeremy kind of realized, at that point, and seeing that vein, that it wasn’t really fun and games right now, and Michael was actually kind of pissed— but he didn’t speak up, he couldn’t speak up, why couldn’t he speak up? “What’s up with you man? You’re never off your game this much.”

Predictably, Jeremy just didn’t know how to answer, and of course he didn’t, what was he supposed to say?

Thoughts, thoughts, like he said before, they constantly pestered him. Push those away Jeremy and say something.

“I— I dunno man, I, I guess I got distracted—” Michael’s face scrunched up and got more irritated, Jeremy choked down his fear. “I’ve been really stressed out today and I don’t know why.” Jeremy haplessly answered, still kind of panicked because he never knew how to act when Michael was mad.

He specifically tried to make himself sound as sad as possible so that Michael would just wrap it up to his anxiety and leave it at that.

Jeremy’s really been working on those impromptu acting skills for the past week now, and wow, he wondered why that was. At this rate, he mind as well sign up for the afterschool play, because he’s definitely got a knack for this, thanks Mr Reyes.

Either way, Jeremy hoped it’d suffice. Sure he felt bad for lying to Michael so often now, but this was the one thing Jeremy couldn’t talk to him about. Lying was necessary.

Well, it wasn’t a complete lie, to be fair. He just had to hide the reason *why* he was so stressed. Having a crush on your best friend was kind of exhausting, and it *showed*, hell, Jeremy hadn’t slept right in a few days, so his face was more pallid than usual, and his nervous tendencies were non-stop. It wasn’t like Jeremy was exploiting Michael’s good heart by purposefully making himself look helpless, he *was* helpless.

Maybe that contributed to why Michael bought into Jeremy’s lie. Jeremy looked like a wreck, and he’d been acting like one, too. Bitten lips and chewed nails, eye bags and excessively warm skin— yeah, that summed up Jeremy’s forlorn appearance almost every day this week.

Michael shrugged, and though he was obviously still a little pissed off by the way his teeth were
still gritted (and he had every right to be) for their loss, he couldn’t blame Jeremy for having anxiety.

Michael scooted closer to him and groaned, giving up on his grudge because seriously, he couldn’t hold it against Jeremy if he tried. Instead, Michael weakly smiled and plucked a *Hershey’s Kiss* from a bag of goodies from his recent haul to a convenience store. Jeremy’s smile came back just as feeble, if not more.

Jeremy’s heart trembled when Michael’s shoulder pressed into his. The stressed sigh he let out was sinful to Jeremy’s ears, but he nervously kept his eyes on the goodie bag instead of daring to look up at Michael.

*Stop thinking like that, idiot.*

“Do you wanna talk about it?” Michael asked, and of course he’d ask that, because Michael was always concerned about Jeremy. Jeremy shook his head, and trolled his mind for a verbal response.

“Thing is— I don’t really know why I’m so stressed today, maybe I didn’t sleep right yesterday.” Jeremy said, and it was as earnest as possible without spilling out the words on Jeremy’s broken record player.

*I like you, I like you, I like you more than I should. That’s my problem.*

He twiddled with this thumbs, the silence between them comfortable enough to where Jeremy could grab a small fistful of *Sour Patch Kids* and eat without feeling tense or awkward. “You sure?” Michael said, and Jeremy hoped he wouldn’t get closer.

Because everytime he did, that recorder player got a little louder.

Inquisitive Michael used all the tactics he knew, the ones that worked like charms on Jeremy—smoldering glances, serious tones, and yup, physical contact, again, Jeremy’s biggest weakness. Jesus, was this what an interrogation was like?

Jeremy reassuringly nodded, feeling a lot more pressure to answer than he usually would when Michael’s hand grazes his shoulder. He didn’t know or care how pink his face was anymore, it was just one of those things like that were inevitable when Michael got so close.

Finally though, Michael looked pleased with his inspection, and dropped the suspicion. He leant back closer to the floor.

“Yes, I wanna take a break from it for a while so uh,” Michael started, and suddenly, there was a smile cracking at his lip line. Jeremy thought he might’ve done something, and he scrunched his face up in confusion.

“What?” asked Jeremy quizzically.

“No no, nothing with you, I was just gonna ask if you wanna get stoned, but I realized how weird that sounded, just randomly.” he chuckled, and Jeremy didn’t really see what was so funny, but after a second, he figured that yeah, maybe it would’ve been a little weird.

Then a brief silence returned, before Jeremy nervously peeped up.

“Uhm, would you? Smoke pot, I mean,”

He started the ‘I mean’ with some intent to finish his sentence, but he couldn’t find any words to
stay after it.

Michael actually looked a little surprised.

Probably because Jeremy has always been super weary around drugs since they were little, even if he’s already tried pot before, it still seemed weird coming from him, plus he came off a little more gung-ho than he was intending.

“Sure, if you want to,”

Jeremy shyly nodded his head, and Michael laughed. Sure, it was unlike Jeremy to actually want to do those type of things, but he kind of enjoyed last time— putting the shotgunning aside— it’d been fun to let loose for a little and try it again.

Plus, he was kind of curious for this ‘buzz’ thing everyone overhyped. Maybe they did shotgunning wrong, or maybe Jeremy just didn’t inhale enough, but he didn’t feel any buzz last time.

“I gotta go upstairs though, that’s where I keep it so,” Michael said, and with an acknowledging murmur from Jeremy, he was off on his journey, traipsing up the stairs pretty carefully.

That’s when Jeremy realized that he wasn’t really sure what time it was anymore. They’d been playing games all night, going in and out of spiels about their stupid assignments or the latest rumour Rich graced Jeremy with. From the short basement window near the ceiling, he could tell it was night time, but he had no clue as to the hour. Could be nine, could be two, he didn’t know, or care, really.

He shoveled another scoopful of candies into his mouth and nursed a cup of water that was surprisingly, still cold.

---

Michael returned back downstairs after two minutes of Jeremy listening to the basement ceiling creaking when he stepped on top of it. In his pocket, peaking out, was the same casing.

Though, Jeremy suddenly realized something, and then, his stomach started fluttering with panic, because how was he going to smoke it?

Last time, they resorted to shotgunning, but Jeremy couldn’t imagine being that close to Michael again, it might kill him.

Will he just have to try smoking straight again? Oh, God, he really didn’t think this one through

Michael seemed all too casual as waltzed over, grabbed his beanbag and threw it beside Jeremy’s, subsequently dropping into the flexible cushion.

And while Jeremy’s mind was abuzz with the words ALERT, ALERT, YOU’RE TOTALLY FUCKED, Michael hummed to some tune and rolled himself a joint.

“You okay buddy? Yanno, it’s fine if you’ve got cold feet, you don’t gotta smoke.” Michael said, his voice seemingly in tune with the beat in his head. Jeremy choked down a swallow.

*Here’s your exit, tell him you don’t want to, you’ll be fine! He’s understanding!* A logical part of
his brain said, but it was overturned by all his frayed nerves and twitchy habits.

So Jeremy shrugged, hardly even considering that internal monologue and letting his lips move on their own, which proved to be, a big fucking mistake. “Nah man, I… I uhm, I liked it last time.”

His internal monologue just facepalmed, if it could. He just double-downed.

Not only that, but it seemed like Michael suddenly swerved off beat. He looked shocked, and the room went soundless.

Did I say something?

Michael’s fingers too paused and stopped working on crafting the joint, instead, they just held it up; like he forgot about smoking for a second.

And maybe he did, because in the still air, Jeremy realized that what he’d said might have a second meaning.

Shotgunning. He told Michael he liked it when they shotgunned.

Was that a red glow on the tips of Michael’s cheeks? Which, was so damn visible because Michael was staring up at him, oh, and why was there a red glow on Michael’s cheeks?

“Ohm, thanks, I think. Me too.” said Michael, and it was probably one of the only time Jeremy’s seen him flustered enough that he stuttered.

Was Jeremy’s face hot? It shouldn’t be. He seriously better pull himself together and stop being so infatuated with Michael, because this was probably nothing and he should overthinking it.

Though, he couldn’t really hear anything, outside the static hymn in his head, and the loud thumping of his heartbeat in his burning ears.

His gaze dove back onto the floor, and it was like it was glued in place. This time, there was no humming, no head-bopping, no side-eye glances at Jeremy, though, he could see the red dwindle off Michael’s face.

It was a little awkward, the mood afterwards, because neither said anything, like nothing ever happened. But they both knew that something did, and they were comfortable knowing that. That weird connection they had made things okay, just not okay enough to mention out loud.

Somewhat, Jeremy was still gushing about it, the tender look in Michael’s eyes and his sincere tone, but now he was also worrying if Michael was okay, or if he’d been too obvious, and holy shit you’re not supposed to do things like that.

Don’t give yourself away, Jeremy.

The hesitant thoughts poofed after Michael emerged from the floor looking impressed with himself. It’s not unusual for Michael to look smug, but this time, his sly smile was lustrous, and infectious, and Jeremy found himself grinning back uncontrollably.

“So do you want to try again on your own first?” Michael asked, and good thing he mentioned that, because Jeremy felt somehow very ready to be so close again—which he definitely wasn’t. Luckily, the rational side of Jeremy mustered enough strength to grab the joint before the emotional half could protest. “Sure.” he simpered.
After Jeremy propped the butt of the joint between his lips, Michael lifted a lighter at its tip, shielding from any wind with his other hand, and flicked his finger.

And again, Jeremy fell flat on his face. Why was it always so scratchy coming from the joint? It wasn’t as bad like it’d been a week ago, but still, he doubled over and coughed the smoke out, instead of just expelling like a normal person.

Was he placing his lips weirdly? Where were they even supposed to go? Seriously, Jeremy was dumbfounded, what was he doing wrong?

“You suck man,” flouted Michael sarcastically, also, thanks Michael, you jackass. Jeremy was trying his best.

He was grateful that this time that Michael didn’t keel over and laugh at him, no instead he just kind of chuckled and snatched the joint from Jeremy’s hands.

“No, like this,” he insisted, and he wrapped his lips around the exact same place Jeremy did (ok, Jeremy really didn’t understand what he was doing wrong anymore), and took a pretty swift, but expansive hit. Jeremy watched his chest rise and fall.

“Yeah, I did that.” said Jeremy, frustrated. It looked so easy when he did it, but Michael’s also had a lot more practice, so he shouldn’t be so hard on himself. Besides, it was smoking pot, not math. It didn’t really matter or have any relevancy outside these small moments in Michael’s house.

But somehow, these small moments in Michael’s house felt like everything to Jeremy Heere, he loved them.

“Obviously not, here, do you wanna shotgun again? Or just keep going until you can actually get it down?” Michael said, uncharacteristically calm.

Jeremy gulped, sure he predicted this, but here he was in the moment with still, no plans on how to cope with it.

Because there’s something that knows better tells Jeremy that's telling him he knows he should say no, but Jeremy doesn’t want to know better. Jeremy wants to be ignorant and selfish and dig himself deeper into his grave, so he does.

“C—can we shotgun then? It’s uhm, it’s a lot easier.” suggested Jeremy, his voice hoarser than usual, but to be fair, the top of his throat felt like it was burning off, so he had a free pass.

He took another sip of his water, and neglected the fluster in his cheeks as he watched Michael walk on his knees across the carpet.

Jeremy was still on his beanbag, his weary eyes trying to retreat to the smoldering joint in Michael’s fingertips, but he physically couldn’t ignore him after he fitted himself between Jeremy’s legs.

Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit.

He couldn’t see how red his face was, but if there’d been a scale for how red it could go, he probably just broke it.

Here he was, sunken into a beanbag, about to shotgun smoke again (seriously, how did he up here a second time?) and Michael, newfound crush of Jeremy Heere, was shimmied in between his thighs. Of course their crotches weren’t touching (thank God), but they were pretty fucking close.
Jeremy tried not to think of anything that wasn’t platonic, but it was so fucking hard.

Well, probably not the only thing that was fucking hard, but he was especially trying not to acknowledge that.

“You ready?” Michael said, in a voice that was sinfully tender, and holy fuck, he shouldn’t be allowed to use it right now, in the position they were in? Should be illegal. Jeremy just squeaked out a ‘yes’ and hoped it was intelligible enough for Michael to understand.

He needed to get this over with, and soon, because dear God, Jeremy didn’t know how long he could last in this position before he physically bursts.

Though, when Michael moved even fucking closer after taking a hit from the joint, climbing on top of him, Jeremy froze from shock. His soul leapt out of his skin.

Because he shouldn’t be so close to Michael, he shouldn’t be wanting to get closer, but God, it made him feel so alive.

He couldn’t just look away, Michael took up most of his vision and everything else was a blur in his peripherals, so there went that idea. Still, he tried to focus on a bright purple-y colour in the background, Jeremy was pretty sure it was a Cadbury bag.

But Michael was close, really fucking close. His face hovered about an inch over Jeremy’s and his crotch ghosted his, because he simply has to be this tantalizingly close—

and as if it couldn’t get any worse, that’s when his free hand grabbed onto Jeremy’s jaw to keep him in place.

And suddenly, Jeremy couldn’t even try to focus on the cheap candies anymore. His eyes flitted back to Michael, wide with alarm.

What.

Jeremy screwed his eyes shut in fear he’d end up doing something he’d regret, plus, Michael closed his eyes too.

His hand was really warm compared to Jeremy’s bony cheeks, he duly noted. In fact, his hand actually felt like fire against Jeremy’s skin, burning him, but somehow also making him run cold at the same time.

But Jeremy refused to move, he had to bare through it and push the fluttering in his stomach down. Sure, maybe he flinched, but he didn’t jolt away, nor was he actively planning an escape right now.

The first plume happened after Jeremy heard an ‘Ah’ sound expel through Michael’s mouth. He was so stunned that he only realized that he was supposed to breathe it in when, in his natural breathing cycle, he feels it tease the back of his throat.

Yeah, embarrassing. Jeremy felt all the more stupid, but he played it off like he’d taken it in and hoped Michael’s eyes hadn’t been open to see Jeremy’s gaffe. Luckily, Michael didn’t say anything, he just backed away slightly for another hit.

Second time was better. For starters, Jeremy didn’t forget to breathe in, so a vast improvement.

Jeremy half-opened his eyes, fluttering his lashes to combat the heavy smoke billowing out of Michael’s mouth. Jeremy licked his lips just because they were dry, and let himself inhale as much
as he could.

It tickled going down, and he tried to let the breath sit there at the bottom of his chest for his lungs to absorb it. He tried to tuck it away and push it down like the heartthrob he was swallowing. Jerem...
Jeremy missed it right after it passed, and like that, it was gone, as quick as it came.

Because Michael had apparently caught on too, and he slowly backed his head away from Jeremy’s. This time, it wasn’t to take another hit. He found himself laid back, sitting on his knees in front of Jeremy, between his thighs.

Looking like he was kind of admiring Jeremy, maybe? If Jeremy was being hopeful, then yes, by the look in his eyes, Michael was admiring him.

But somehow, Michael was only hyper-aware of their humiliating positioning now; meanwhile, Jeremy was still a literal blushing mess, hot in his cheeks, and ears. That unholy chuckle Michael elicited didn’t help his cause either.

“Whoops.” Michael simpered, and God, was he nervous? Michael never got nervous. “Erm, sorry, Jer.”

*Please don’t say sorry.*

Michael nudged Jeremy to look down too, as if Jeremy wasn’t already extremely conscious of how close they were— every point of contact, how their legs were sort of touching, how far apart his knees were spread and yes, what other things they could be doing in this same position.

A little something zipped down his spine, it was searing hot and almost made him gasp, or maybe even moan, thinking about just how Michael would— *No, no, don’t think on that. Bad Jeremy.*

“O-oh! Oh.” feigned Jeremy, and, on his better judgement, he scooted a little further back into his beanbag to keep his distance. Being any closer would probably pop the bubbling balloon that was Jeremy Heere’s feelings, and *thoughts.*

Michael looked a little sheepish as he too, shimmied away from Jeremy, finding solace back on his own beanbag while trying to hide his face. Every second that passed seemed to make the air more and more nervous, but luckily, Michael caught him before Jeremy started hyperventilating.

“So— uhm, do you feel high at all?”

Oh, yeah, the high.

Now that Michael mentioned it, maybe? Wasn’t weed supposed to take a little longer to set in though? Jeremy was also pretty sure that light feeling in his chest wasn’t from the pot (probably from oxygen deprivation, because Michael made him absolutely breathless), but he figured maybe the slight ease in his head was.

Either way, he shrugged. “A little, I think?” Jeremy answered, lying, but not really lying. He just couldn’t even focus on the high right now. He was still living down that moment. Still feeling tingly and bubbly and seriously he could probably just explode with energy any minute now. Maybe a little sickly, too.

“I— I’m going to the bathroom, after do you wanna play video-games?” His mouth said, and frankly, it sounded more of a statement rather than a question. Either way, with one puzzled nod from Michael, Jeremy kicked himself up off the beanbag and walked away.

Confirmed. Michael Mell *will* be the death of Jeremy.

Neither boy mentioned his comment for the rest of the night. Jeremy wasn’t sure if he was grateful or disappointed.
On the days after Wednesday’s ‘epiphany’, Jeremy tried to spend more time figuring himself out.

Of course, after everything that happened, Jeremy couldn’t just go back to beating thoughts out of his head. Sadly, he couldn’t deny himself anymore, even if he really wanted to sometimes.

He probably couldn’t if he tried, anyways. Reality proved to be a cruel bitch, and while Jeremy could lie and say he would never have a crush— that word sounded so childish— on Michael, his wandering eyes and new anxious tendencies around him couldn’t.

Still, it was foreign to Jeremy to try to be so open with himself and his feelings, but he needed to, didn’t he? He needed a smidge of self-respect and enough awareness to acknowledge his emotions for a change.

Change, change, change was always so dreaded by people, because change was bad, but change could also be also good. Change happened, change was inevitable, and even if change hurt, change would make it better.

It’ll be okay. Michael’s told him countless times in their lives before, and still, at fifteen, Jeremy still believes him.

Though, Jeremy was screwed, and there’s no doubt about it. Under the optimism that he could learn how to ‘control his crush’ on Michael is a boy betrayed by his own heart. He wished Michael could comfort him and pet his hair and lend him the same spot, right beside his neck, to cry into, but Michael can’t.

A New Jersey boy of fifteen with a growing crush on someone he’s known for eleven years— seriously, at this rate, Jeremy’s mom will have a more spotty attendance in his life—, and that someone who happens to be male.

In retrospect, that was a terrible sitcom concept, but it just might air because of how fucked over the protagonist is.

Jeremy submitted himself to the fact that he lived that shitty sitcom life, and he at the end of the day, he could accept that he might (well yeah, he definitely does, but he likes pretending sometimes) have a crush on his best friend.

So now, Jeremy was basically working on schooling his emotions away. Sure the crush thing would be there, buzzing in the back of his mind, and he didn’t know when it’d leave, but he’d learn how to manage it. He’d have to learn how to manage it, and Michael was worth that— their friendship was worth that.

Tuck it away perfectly, make sure Michael never finds out and continue being the player two to his player one.

That just took time, and practice.

So, just to contain the emotions, Jeremy started keeping a journal, and by Thursday afternoon, he’d basically created himself a rulebook.

Well, the journal was physical, but the rulebook was just a figment of Jeremy’s imagination, he
made it sound like you could buy a physical copy of it at *Barnes & Noble*.

*Yeah, a rulebook, tch. ‘Jeremy Heere’s guide how to not ruin a friendship’.*

That rulebook was *originally* a mental list of Do’s and Don’t’s at first, but after another week (and Saturday) with another week’s worth of thinking, feeling, and experiencing, Jeremy also ended up writing it all down on his old laptop.

He’d actually name it ‘*Jeremy Heere’s guide how to not ruin a friendship*’ if he wasn’t so damn paranoid. Instead, he named it something inconspicuous and made sure to page break the first page so the preview would appear blank.

Knowing that Michael sometimes had nosey moods too, he also made sure to lock it on a Word Online document, which he’d have to sign out of later, just to be safe.

At this point, things had sort of sunk in and yeah, Jeremy Heere definitely has a crush on his male best friend. It wasn’t just amok hormones like he tried to tell himself initially. So, with that in mind, he had to do all in his power to protect himself, protect his dignity, and protect their friendship.

He tried to breathe in deeply, but he ended up overextending himself and it actually kind of hurt getting out. That much air just couldn’t fit in his lungs.

But he moved past the pressurized pain in his chest, and let his eyes flicker up to the laptop’s screen, the only focal point in his dark, dank bedroom. It was a rainy night in September and here he was.

Jeremy’s thought a lot about the different rules he should set, but it felt a lot more real now, sitting here in a nest of blankets and writing them all down.

*Whatever I have to do to preserve my friendship with Michael, I guess.*

He began tapping away.

**ONE** make sure you don’t say/do anything that’ll give you away.

That one was a given. Risque or flirty comments might blow his cover, and he wasn’t about to throw away eleven years.

**TWO** try to catch yourself from thinking about him un-platonically.

Un-platonic? Non-platonic? Jeremy didn’t want to say ‘*romantically*’, somehow that seemed a little too forward.

He figured trying to catch himself would train him to stop the thoughts altogether. Plus, Jeremy didn’t know how long this infatuation would last, and he didn’t want Michael to just become only a crush to Jeremy.
THREE no thoughts about him sexually, seriously, he’s your best friend.

Jeremy swallowed. He couldn’t believe he had to write that one down, because this was Michael he was talking about, Michael — but remembering how tingly Jeremy got from just his breath on the back of his neck? Yeah, Jeremy had to keep himself in check.

Still, it sounded a lot less pathetic in his head.

FOUR don’t tell him your sexuality, or that you’re questioning it.

It was kind of an oddball rule, but Jeremy felt obligated to keep it a secret. For starters, it wasn’t really something he was proud of or confident in. Plus, telling someone felt like confirmation, and he didn’t want that. He didn’t want to officiate his sexuality as ‘not straight’, because he still was kind of hoping that this was all a phase or joke, or dream, or something.

As for the journal? He wasn’t stupid, there was no way in hell he’d bring it to Michael’s for the weekend and risk leaving it there when most of the entries were about him. So it was under his bed with the old scrapbook. Jeremy made a note to himself to write in it later when he wasn’t so tired.

Maybe check the scrapbook out too, maybe— though he wasn’t sure why it would— seeing pictures of them growing up together would knock some sense into Jeremy about having a crush on Michael. Hopefully remind him that their bond was brotherly and platonic, not anything else?

God he was pitiful.

The journal’s pages, which, Jeremy’s only written in about three entries on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday— were lined with, you guessed it, Michael, but there was also different interaction sequences Jeremy had throughout the day, updated thoughts on his ‘sexuality crisis’ and the occasional reminder about homework.

But yeah, it was mostly Michael.

Oh, and a lot of self-hating dialogue, that and cute things Michael did came as a package.

Jeremy stopped thinking about his journal, and instead looked blankly at the word document.

Really? Only four rules? He was sure in his head there’d been more, but he really couldn’t think of any others. He was pretty sure the rules he wrote down covered all of his gay shenanigans.

So, after another six minutes of staring at the computer screen, Jeremy sighed heavily.

Admittedly, it was hard to act like nothing was different now, when everything was so, so different.

The four rules would have to suffice until he thought about another. He logged out of Microsoft Word Online and picked a Rolo candy from his lap. Michael had bought him the candies Saturday with a bunch of other sweets, but since Michael didn’t like Rolos, Jeremy got to bring them home.
It was Sunday night, at promptly too-late-to-be-awake-on-a-school-night o’clock. Somehow, his life in the past two weeks have been more adventurous than the whole summer had been.

For some reason, that made Jeremy smile a little— Michael always made his life more interesting in the weirdest of ways, didn’t he? Suddenly, there was an emptying ache in his heart.

That empty feeling dwindles when his phone suddenly twitches underneath the comforter.

“michael mellon; ugh, i can’t sleeeeeeeep, r u awake? Today at 1:48”

Of course it was Michael. It’s always Michael.

Jeremy was a little tired, but he still entertains half-assed conversation, mostly comprised of random facts from Michael’s night-time documentary spree.

He retired his laptop’s cold, blue light. So he tucked it back into the second beside drawer, where it belonged, and instead lets himself bask in the warm glow Michael cast on him through the small phone screen.

Chapter End Notes

i don't have to up the rating for suggestive sentences right??? fuck man idk
Love— the love Jeremy Heere inarguably had for his best friend— proved hard to ignore.

He’s been keeping his journal for about two weeks now. In it was still a compilation of diurnal interactions (mostly with Michael), reminders to do tedious assignments, classroom stories, and oh yeah, pages upon pages of heartache.

Safe to say, it wasn’t hard to remember to write in it, since everyday Michael became more and more of a heartthrob.

Jeremy noted down his quirks, adorable tendencies and times where his own heart stopped.

On page six: how bright Michael’s smile had been on the day his uncle told him he’d pass down his car to Michael when he turned sixteen, or on page eleven: the singular time Jeremy heard Michael’s voice crack on a walk home from school, or page three: shotgunning two Saturday’s ago.

Admittedly, those rules Jeremy made? They were a little hard to follow in day-to-day practice — except number three, Jeremy needed that one to keep his sanity— but that was to be expected, wasn’t it?

Afterall, Michael has always shown Jeremy that he doesn’t need rules anyway. He’s always been the one exception to all of his rules.

If keeping a journal has done any good, it was that Jeremy could at least now deal with his emotions a little better.

Don’t get him wrong, it wasn’t like he wasn’t affected by his crush on Michael anymore, he definitely was. But through that diary (he’d never admit he kept one. Jeremy was pretty sure the only people deemed socially acceptable to keep diaries were twelve year old girls with celebrity crushes) he somewhat learned how to control his feelings.

Because at least, after a fortnight’s worth of schooling and self-discipline, he could sometimes subside his feelings, and ‘react properly’.

So now he could at least pretend that everything was fine, that he was more than just the shell of a boy with his heart pounding out of his chest, who could hear more than just his heartbeat thrumming in his ears like a drum and—

‘Reacting properly’ was a loose term. It really just meant how Jeremy acted on the outside, the feeling on the inside was the same.
No more mid-sentence freezing, no more flinching from sudden brushes of Michael’s arm. Ostensibly, everything he couldn’t conceal looked like a symptom of his already-acknowledged anxiety, not a symptom of heartbreak and unrequited love.

Frankly, Jeremy didn’t now if that was good or bad. Which was pathetic right? Because he spent all this time trying to hide his feelings, trying to protect his friendship and keep Michael in his life — but it still felt so empty. Jeremy wanted more, but couldn’t have it.

He wanted Michael, he wanted to be Michael’s, just as casually and accepted as anything else in Michael’s life— like Michael’s glasses, Michael’s pot, Michael’s family, Michael’s home, Michael’s headphones, Michael’s Jeremy.

Jeremy wanted to hint his affections, bleed out his love through flirty comments and shy winks; he wanted clearance, confessions, kisses and a relationship.

But he couldn’t have any of that, he couldn’t even wish for it— Jeremy feels guilty if he does. He’d always be Michael’s friend, and that would have to be enough.

It’s not enough, but it has to be.

Sometimes, he still flinches. Sometimes, he still freezes.

Sometimes Jeremy might forget how screwed he is, and get lost in the moment. Sometimes he gets lost in Michael’s ramblings, Michael’s eyes, Michael’s life-saving Geometry notes, Michael’s comfort.

But he’ll jot that down in his notebook and berate himself, saving it for later.

If Jeremy was honest, it felt good telling someone— some thing, it’s inanimate, but that’s okay— about his crush. He could completely understand why people gush about their crushes to their friends, because Jeremy really wanted to do that.

Except he couldn’t, his only friend was his crush, and he didn’t really have ‘other friends’.

Actually, maybe he did now. School started a month ago, and Jeremy had actually started acquainting himself with people who weren’t Michael recently. Rich Goranski being his prime example.

Of course most came up by sheer coincidence, by the means that they were either only talking because they sat next to each other or they were forced partners. Either way, once the ice was broken, they were basically golden.

Despite Jeremy’s anxiety, he was a pretty good listener and chimed in when he could. It’s always the first interactions that’re the shakiest.

Anyway, Jeremy has considered telling Christine about it. ‘It’ being the Michael situation and ‘Christine’ being a girl he met in his Band class.

She played the piano and had been for about four years (her parents really encouraged music, but she loved drama and theatre more), and everyday they talk.

They only met because Jeremy stumbled in late to class on the first day and had to sit next to her. That small interaction spiraled into a friendship.

Either way, Jeremy has never had this many contacts in his phone before, plus, it was pretty
liberating being able to chat with someone and not constantly be freaking out because they were so adorable for once.

Though, Christine was pretty cute, but Jeremy wasn’t flustered to admit that. More of an ‘objective’ cuteness.

Funny thing about that actually, Jeremy really tried to force himself to like her— like the way he liked Michael— but, of course, he just couldn’t. He sort of was still hoping that a crush on her would just surface soon because his relationship with her had so little stakes. They’ve only been friends three weeks and it’d at least let him identify as straight.

The whole ‘not-straight’ Jeremy Heere was a concept he was still trying to grasp, but he could ignore that battle mostly. He already surrendered weeks ago, anyways.

Of course, Operation Get-A-Crush-On-Christine never happened, but he might still be praying on it.

Rationally, he knew that it’s a stupid idea. You can’t force a crush, but Jeremy was desperate, okay? Two and a half weeks in and he still didn’t know what to do about the Michael situation, other than hide it and hope it passes soon. Even if that was probably the most depressing of solutions, it was the only safe one.

Funny. Jeremy was used to being the one to hoping the girls would crush on him, not the other way around.

On Tuesday of the second week, Michael showed up to school with the missing Ecuadorian patch plastered on his right arm. Right underneath the Filipino one, like he’d suggested.

(Michael grinned as he sat down, looking a little disheveled. It’s probably the first day Michael was actually on time for the second period’s bell, and Jeremy was already sitting down, keenly typing something out on his phone. He looked up.

“I just ran here,” Michael said, and he’s so nonchalant about it, but Jeremy spluttered in response.

“What?”

Michael laughed, and suddenly, his shoulder became a lot more visible.

There, discerning itself from the red fabric, was his new yellow and blue flag. Jeremy wouldn’t know what it was if he didn’t recall a week prior, when he talked about the Ecuador patch ‘not coming in yet’. “You heard me.”

Jeremy tsked and cocked his eyebrow (could he do that? He was pretty sure he was cocking his eyebrow right now), sort of confused.

“First of all, wipe that face off, it’s weird on you. Secondly, Mr Calum said I gotta be on time or he’s bouta give me detention. I tried to tell him that my first is just way too far away, but he didn’t listen and sent me to the principal’s office for swearing.” grumbled Michael, but he had a grin on his face. “Pparently you’re not aloud to say ‘fuck’ to your teachers.”
“Who knew?” he shrugged, but his eyes warned around Mr Calum’s desk grimly. It was before class, so he’s off doing his business, probably pulling up the attendance list on his computer because he’s awful with names.

“Anyway, is that the Ecuador patch thingy?” Jeremy said, in you know, the least awkward way to start a conversation, directing his eyes again to Michael’s shoulder— but not missing his incredibly award-winning smile.

*Jeremy wouldn’t miss it for the world.*

Michael slugged his shoulder upwards, and plastered on a pompous, faux British accent, holding his head high. “Why hm *mm* ph Jeremy, I suppose you’re right, it is.”

Jeremy giggled, but didn’t take his eyes off the colours, like he was trying to memorize its design.

“Dad got annoyed with how Ecuador’s flag is *below* the Philippines, but like, I’m mostly Filipino, and only like, a quarter Ecuadorian, or whatever it’s called.” said Michael, and it’s suddenly alarmingly quiet in the classroom, because the bell had just rung and Mr Calum was up from his chair already.

“I think the stitch colours are a little more faded than the others, which is kind of annoying, but I don’t really care.” Michael mentioned. Everyone ignores them, but he still lowers his voice.

Mr Calum certainly doesn’t though. Michael was one of his least favourite students already (surprising, since he had a bunch of other twerps in the class who were much more deserving of the title), so he was extra attentive, no matter how soft and hushed Michael’s voice went.

“Aye! Heere, Mell, class has *started.*” Mr Calum called from his desk, which was now sitting on.

Mr Calum proved to be a little too senile for fifty-four. He was the teacher who grumbled about kids being too reliant on technology, the teacher with the obscene hand gestures, the teacher with a hard-on for disciplined students, the teacher who regaled stories about how he— apparently– was beaten as a kid by his *own* teachers as a scare tactic for his classes.

So he was a little tough on them. Jeremy plied his eyes away from Michael and flusteredly opened his binder.

Michael *shouted* a sorry from across the class and did the same, but under their pensive expressions, they’re both giggling.

Frankly, Michael looked nicer with his hoodie decked out in all sorts of new patches, and the Ecuadorian flag is just one of the last pieces to the puzzle.

It felt a lot more like home for Jeremy. It felt a lot more like Michael.

It was Thursday, on week four since the epiphany (but Jeremy wasn’t counting anymore, days seemed to blend together) and Michael was *absent* from *school*.

An occurrence that was kind of foreign, because despite Michael’s laid back, lax, and confident personality, his parents have always really strict on a good attendance, unless he was *really* sick.
Thursday was upside-down. Michael was absent, and Rich? Richard Goranski? Yeah, *that* kid—*he* decided to sit at their table.

In the same place Michael would.

Which was weird, no one (except maybe a lab partner one of them had?) ever sat at their table—and even if Rich and Jeremy have grown to become pretty close friends, they *never* sat together at lunch. Never even mentioned it, and they had class together right before lunch.

In his hand, a bottle of water, and slung across his other forearm was his backpack—not on his back. He sauntered over with a prideful smile, and wow, that workout regime is putting in work.

Rich’s muscles were proudly on display. His wardrobe has been progressively devolving into loose tank tops and cargo shorts.

“Hey Heere,” Rich greeted, with his usual fiery self-assurance into Jeremy’s secluded part of the canteen. Nobody except nobodys (Jeremy and Michael) sat over here, that’s a Middleborough fact.

And Rich was a *popular* kid, not just a lonely nerd looking for friends, so even if he talked to Jeremy, he shouldn’t be at lunch. That’s not what popular kids did, they constricted conversing with nobodys to classroom dialogue, casual insults in the halls, and *maybe* some text messages.

So Jeremy honestly thought it was a prank. He was puzzled, and looked up to Rich.

“Hi, Rich?”

There was some anxiety in his throat that leaked out into his shy tone. His spine cowered timidly and awkwardly hunched over the table like a cat. His first instincts were to be cautious and wary, because interactions like these never came without a cost, so he was.

Jeremy’s hair was practically standing up straight on his neck when *Rich took a seat beside him.*

“Cheat day.” he said in his usual snarky tones, and so casually, he pulled up his backpack up onto the small round table, and brought out a bag of fun-sized chocolates.

But of course, Jeremy was still dubious, his limbs basically frozen in time. “Uhh, Rich?”

“Yeah buddy?”

Rich already had about three chocolates in his mouth, but apparently didn’t care about etiquette, so he still spoke. Jeremy kept his distance, since Rich also had a bad habit of accidentally spitting when talking.

“Why are you sitting… *here*?” asked Jeremy, and his eyebrows were still furrowed in confusion, but he finally sunk his teeth into the skinned orange from the pre-Rich era.

The awkward air Jeremy was pretty sure was exclusive to him, since Rich doesn’t seemed bothered at all. He looked comfortable, confident, not like Michael’s confident, but confident in a different way. “Oh, yeah. You looked hella lonely and miserable so here I am. Y’know, charity work. You and headphones-kid in an argument or somethin’?”

Jeremy’s mouth moved on autopilot, so he didn’t bother getting offended or thinking of a rebuttal. If this was Rich’s Make-A-Wish contributions, so be it.

“No no, he’s just sick or something”—Jeremy said, but he can’t even be sure. Yeah, Michael was
probably just still asleep, but Jeremy was anxious, he hasn’t responded all day. — “and I don’t really got other friends who’d wanna hang out at lunch? So yeah.”

Rich’s lips turned flat-line. “Thas’ a little self-deprecating, but I see what you mean. Hey, if your buddy’s not here tomorrow, maybe you could meet my friends.”

Jeremy didn’t like how Rich bared his teeth menacingly when he said that, at all. He physically looked like a nerdy shark (Rich’s dorkiness still shone through his eccentric-jock persona. Mostly through his braces), but a shark is a shark and Jeremy doesn’t exactly want to be eaten today.

Obviously, Rich noticed Jeremy wince. “Don’t worry man! They don’t bite.”

*Severely doubt that.*

“And some of them are pretty cool. We’re not all jerks, yanno.”

Jeremy has had a few experiences in the hallway that would say different, but okay. “You serious?” he said skeptically, and Rich nodded. It wasn’t too reassuring, since how reassuring could Rich Goranski get— but it would suffice.

*Wait a moment.*

“So why can’t Michael come if he is here tomorrow?” Jeremy asked.

Rich shrugged. “Really, I don’t care, Jake just said he wants to get to know different people. I just assumed you two jerk each other off at lunch or something.”

Well, there’s Rich’s true intentions, but they were surprisingly benevolent— also, did he mean Dillinger? As in Jake Dillinger?

Better question, did he just imply you and Michael jerk each other off?

Oh so *that’s* why his insides were on fire. Jeremy probably let out some sort of malfunctioning squeak, carrying the message ‘404 Jeremy Not Found’, but Rich didn’t seem to notice.

“Seriously, are you guys dating or what?” he hummed, uncharacteristically calm, fiddling with the plastic zipper on the top of the bag of chocolates.

“U—uhm, no.”

That was all Jeremy could say. That was his denial, just a meekly, half-assed ‘no’. It sounded like an apology, a pitiful one at best.

Unfortunately, Rich wasn’t so forgiving. One eyebrow pushed up like he’d rubbed his face and never smoothed it out again, and it directed into Jeremy’s interest. He suddenly wasn’t so laid-back.

Was Jeremy that obvious?

“Uh-huh, y’anno, you’re not too slick, Heere.” said Rich, and like nothing had ever happened, he slunk back into the bench chair. “But you also look like you’re physically about to burst, so I’m not going to ask.”

There is a God apparently, and Jeremy quietly thanked them for salvation.

“Just assume.” Rich remarked, and yes, it irked Jeremy. He’d love to slap that smirk off Rich’s
face if he wasn’t so buff and more socially adept.

Jeremy didn’t have to stay red-faced for long. That cocktail of anger and shot of embarrassment died off within a few minutes. It’s not like Jeremy ever holds grudges anyways.

For the rest of the lunch hour, the two bothered themselves with Instagram comedy and recent Middleborough news like they would during Chemistry, and since it was just the two of them, Jeremy doesn’t feel too much pressure to be funny.

Somehow, he doesn’t feel the pressure to be anything. He can just be Jeremy for now.

He was grateful that Rich gave him company during lunch. He was grateful that Rich might introduce him to more people. He was grateful for Rich, because he was just another addition in Jeremy’s life.

Rich is eccentric, Rich is Cool, Rich is company.

But he’s not Michael.

Jeremy misses Michael.

What was worse for Jeremy was spending Geometry alone. A class that usually, he and Michael would spend together.

They’d share notes, draw on each other’s papers, or goof about on their phones, but with Michael gone, Jeremy was lost.

No lesson today either, just taking up past homework on the board and more tenacious worksheets.

Forcibly resigned from an actual conversation during his lunch hour, Jeremy sadly hunched over his desk and actually started doing some homework.

(Jeremy was really just scribbling lines of near-unintelligible chicken-scratch in his journal, which he made sure to hide in his binder away from today’s seating partner— a girl who didn’t even spare him a single acknowledging glance.

Still, he felt like his journal was too private to risk anyone seeing, so he cowered his body over it.

On it, on page thirteen was the latest update: ‘Michael absent from school today. It’s like the Sun took a break from being the Sun. I miss its light.’

He quietly scolded himself for writing something that looked so sappy, but he really missed his daily dose of Michael’s Vitamin D.

Wait, that sounded wrong.

He meant the Sun gives Vitamin D and— in this metaphor— Michael is the Sun and Vitamin D is Jeremy’s daily fix of conversation, comedy, music, and heart palpitations, but nevermind.

It still had him blushing, and staring all too intensely at the white, near-blank pages of his journal)
So yeah. Not homework afterall.

Looked like it would just be an entire forty-five minute’s worth of melancholic note-taking and progressively sleepier double-takes to the clock.

The journal only held him off for a little, but when he was finished with the entry (short and sweet — kind of like a subpar poem— because he couldn’t think of anything else to write), the stillness of his Geometry class started getting to him.

So, naturally, anxiety came in to sweep an unsuspecting Jeremy Heere off his feet.

What was it about quiet, unmoving rooms that made him so anxious? They were just unbearable.

Same thing happened when he’d try to go to sleep. He’d start noticing every little thing down to a pin drop, like a cricket soliloquy or slight gust of wind against his window— or in this case, a classmate sharpening their pencil, or the small pulse of somebody’s music playing a little too loudly in their earbuds.

But mostly everyone was still—. Doing work, humming silently with an uncaring teacher at her desk probably grading papers, and Jeremy didn’t have anything else to focus on. Nothing to distract him.

Michael could distract him from times like these, and that’s why Jeremy wished he was here. His only focal point was on the clock behind him, ticking, and ticking, and ticking, and now his leg was bouncing to the same rhythm with every single second that passed.

Jeremy was alone, in class, nail-bitingly anxious and waiting for Michael to buzz his pocketed phone. He’s not allowed to have it out, and the WiFi in the Math department is shit anyways, but he waited for some vibration, some sign of life.

He’s nervous, too; because time was ticking too slowly, because Michael wasn’t at school today, because Rich sat at their table at lunch, because he might be meeting more popular kids tomorrow, because he has a crush on his best friend, because he isn’t straight, because everything feels off, because he is totally screwed.

*Please reply soon, Micah.*

He shouldn’t be nervous. Michael’s probably fine and he usually sleeps in this late when he’s sick. Or whenever he’s home, Michael is almost sixteen, all teenager sleep in late. It’s only twelve thirty-seven, right? So Jeremy is definitely overthinking this.

But did the ticking just get faster?

*Nothing bad happened to Michael. Give the man some breathing room, he’s just sick for God’s sake.*

Jeremy didn’t leave anymore messages other than the five he sent this morning, but he really wanted to. The room was too quiet and he wanted a distraction— no, he *needed* a distraction.

*He’s fine, Jeremy. Just sick, just asleep.*

*Not ignoring you, not in the hospital, not dead. He hasn’t found out about your crush on him. He doesn’t know you’re not straight. You’re fine.*

But Jeremy’s chest cavity still tightened despite his best attempts at positive self-talk, and he was
too far deep in his head that he didn’t notice the teacher focusing in on him at some point of the
lesson.

*Tick, tick, tick…*

His teacher, who he thought had forgiving, and kind eyes, looked vindictive. They searched too far
into Jeremy. Her lips were pursed in anticipation, but Jeremy couldn’t remember whether or not she
even asked a question.

So he looked to the question on the board, but on it, was just a blur, a swivel of black and white.
Jeremy tried to find some dram of math left in his brain.

\[ y = mx + y’ \] you’re totally fucked, you know that right?

Nope. Nothing.

Jeremy blinked straightly at the front wall. Anxiety churned his stomach, but he didn’t move, he
didn’t respond. The teacher was standing at her desk, and there were all sorts of different pairs of
eyes all laid on him, but he couldn’t move, he couldn’t respond.

*He probably knows. He probably found out. That’s why he isn’t here today, that’s why he’s not
texting you, he doesn’t want to see you, he doesn’t want you.*

Good, she looked like she gave up. Her eyes travelled to another part of the room and distantly,
maybe Jeremy heard some other student give the answer for the question he assumed was plastered
on the board.

*Tick, tick, tick, Jeremy. If Michael doesn’t know now, then it’s only a matter of—*

*Tick, tick, tick…*

Jeremy’s leg was bouncing faster than the clock now. Somehow, it only made him more nervous.

How long has he been sitting here? He wasn’t sure, even if the clock was all he was paying
attention to. It could’ve been five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen, twenty, thirty, forty—

The bell rang. The ticking stopped.

*Oh.*

Geometry was over already? So it was twelve fifty-six then—and still, no text from Michael.

He wasn’t sure if he should be relieved that class ended, or panicked because Michael
was apparently still asleep, twenty minutes later.

Jeremy sat there in shock for a couple of long seconds, before he came to his senses and flusteredly
pushed his binder back into the depths of his overstuffed school bag.

Sure he was relieved to be able to go to Band, but his fingers and legs were still a little shaky as he
stood up and turned to the door.

Though, Jeremy shouldn’t be so surprised that *nothing* was that easy, even if that something was
being dismissed from class.

Apparently, he wasn’t let off from Geometry just yet, because behind him, the nasally voice of his
teacher called out above a throng of teenagers. “Ahem. Mr Heere, a word please.”
His Geometry teacher's name was Miss Harper—a short, South-East Asian with no discernible accent. Maybe one of Jeremy's more relaxed teachers during her lessons, but she'd snap on any dimwit who dare interrupt her.

Jeremy and Michael have faced her wrath before, but usually she just ignores them now (since they don’t bother anyone other than each other).

Except now, apparently. Jeremy slowly turned back to her, and she was standing with her head tilted and arms akimbo, quirked in his interest.

"Y— yes, miss?" Jeremy stammered, and after hearing some snarky comment he swore was about him from the last two kids piling out the door, his last smidgen of confidence was gone. He sighed woefully.

"I’m worried about you, your behaviour today was very off. Are you feeling alright, Jeremy?"

Somehow, with her stern voice, creased eyebrows and suspiciously straight back, she managed to be intimidating.

Even when she was trying to be nice—counter-intuitive to the point, but at least she could get some answers out.

"Oh, uhm, yeah, I’m fine." squeaked Jeremy, and in efforts to make himself seem less pathetic, he squared his shoulders. A feeble attempt, might Jeremy add, since Miss Harper saw right through him, looking at him sullenly.

"With all due respect, Mr Heere, you were spaced-out for almost all of my class. Do you need to see the nurse?" she asked calmly, like she wasn’t destroying Jeremy's already dangerously low pride. Her tone was misleading, her uncomfort was palpable too.

But Jeremy was affronted. He wasn’t about to yield to the nurse’s office again, because genuinely, he felt a lot better after the bell had rang.

If he’d actually been able to leave his fucking class on time, or go somewhere other than this whole interrogation-situation here. "What? No, Miss Harper, I’m alright. I’m just a little worried about something right now."

Miss Harper didn’t look too convinced, but her eyes shifted off Jeremy and moved to the desk that he sat at everyday suspiciously. "Is it because Michael isn’t here today? You two are always together, right?"

He’d rather be anywhere but here right now. Jeremy’s cheeks washed out with warmth, so he timidly looked to the ground instead. Of course, she knew. It just confirmed that worry within him that yup, Jeremy was that obvious.

Miss Harper’s face contorted, and her eyes turned kinder, softer, but the shadow she casted on Jeremy felt truly pitiful. A whim of shame infiltrated his heart, and his eyes lowered more.

"Alright, well, if it’s just about him, then head on over to sixth."

A ‘merciful’ Miss Harper turned back into her chair, while an abashed Jeremy rushed to leave the already emptied classroom. He darted out, grabbing his backpack on his way, and let himself catch the breath he’s been holding in the hallway.
Jeremy wouldn’t end up being late to sixth, but the whole Miss Harper interaction had been, quite frankly, pointless.

His stomach was still unsettled, and her small voice of concern and sympathy was ugly. She didn’t really care, she just wanted to feel good about herself by upholding some stupid ‘civil duty’ by asking the overly-anxious boy if he was okay.

He obviously wasn’t, but what was he supposed to tell her? ‘Oh no, don’t worry. I’m just anxious that my life-long male best friend might’ve found out I have a crush on him and that’s why he won’t talk to me. Also, I have a crush on my life-long male best friend and it’s eating me alive.’

Seriously. What was she expecting?

Ugh. Now Jeremy felt worse, now Jeremy felt self-conscious about how much his anxiety was bleeding out.

Things would’ve been better if she just kept her mouth shut, frankly. Jeremy didn’t need people looking out for him so much. It really got annoying sometimes, because she didn’t understand, nor did she want to.

Michael understood, because Michael wanted to.

Jeremy slugged the whole thing off on the threshold into his Band room. He straightened out his posture, and, just for good measure, checked his phone for the sixteenth time that day.

Nothing there. Just a recommendation from Apple to update his phone to the newest iOS install, which he noted for later, even though he’ll probably never get around to actually doing it.

Jeremy sighed haplessly, but after seeing Christine energetically wave her hand at him in the doorway, something filled him with a renewed sense of purpose. His heart ached a little still from the lack of Michael today, but it’s definitely bearable.

She gestured him over, and he followed.

“Jeremy! Thank God you’re here, I really wanted to ask you about something.” Christine immediately plucked him into conversation—a warm sentiment Jeremy was grateful for, because the only other person so enthusiastic about talking to him was Michael.

Jeremy smiled at he sat down on an empty chair with a stand in front of it. Christine played piano, so when they performed, they weren’t supposed to sit together, but in practice, the teacher allowed it.

Middleborough’s Band program offered a lot more than usual high-schools, which was good, because Jeremy wasn’t graceful enough to don an actual violin, and didn’t have big enough lungs to sport something like a tuba or trumpet.

So he picked up the viola instead, a bigger, and in his opinion easier, violin. He splayed out his handbook guide on his podium and keened his ears on Christine.

“— so, they’re holding auditions for the spring play soon, and I was wondering if you could sign up for it with me?”
Christine smiled at him, and frankly, her smile was the most lovable thing about her. It displayed all her passion through the creases of her cheeks.

Like Michael’s. “I mean– of course you don’t have to, but I’d really like it if you did. We’re friends, right? And the theatre has really been lacking membership, and I think you’d really like it. It’s not nearly as bad as everyone thinks.” she explained hastily.

Jeremy was kind of overwhelmed. It wasn’t new that Christine loved theatre (she shared a new Broadway song every week to him), but Jeremy’s never really considered himself a drama guy. He’s always had issues with performances and public speaking.

Theatre, huh. Jeremy was kind of panicked already, something like that could go wrong in so many ways, and frankly, he doesn’t want to be laughed at.

He stuttered for a moment, and Christine looked at him with pure mirth in her black-brown eyes. “Pleeease! I see you in English, and you’re really good at acting when you try, Jeremy.”

On the other hand, maybe if he had something to focus on, it’d be good for him. Maybe theatre wouldn’t be so bad if he actually tried it.

Jeremy’s used to making a fool of himself anyways.

He wasn’t going to lie, the thought did come about: maybe if he dedicated himself more to spending time with Christine, he’d develop a crush on her.

Plus, that hopeful look on Christine’s face? How was he supposed to say no to that?

He bit the inside of his cheek. Jeremy might be considering it.

“Uhm, I don’t know Christine. I’ve never really been into drama.” said Jeremy. It’s apparent he’s nervous.

But it was true. Jeremy never really acted before other than a couple of classes when he was in elementary, and some stage productions throughout middle-school. It’s kind of nerve-racking to be considering being in a literal play.

“Jeremy, it’s not as bad as you think. Everyone in theatre is super understanding about first-timers and stuff. Plus, I think you’d do great.” Christine said, and God, she’s kind of convincing. Maybe it’s the flattery.

“And! And! You haven’t done anything like it before right, isn’t high-school the place where you try all this stuff? What if you really like it? You’d never know if you don’t try.”

Jeremy hated that phrase, but his usually pessimistic attitude about joining the play was kind of overthrown by:

a) His desire to impress friends, even if he was anxious about it (he usually just had to bare through it because Jeremy Heere would not back down from a challenge if it meant respect)

b) His desire to spark a crush on Christine, and

c) Her being right.
High-school was the place where you try new things. Plus, Jeremy was still a little naïve, so yeah, he didn’t immediately shoot down the idea.

“I’ll um, think about it, and I’ll make up my mind by the end of the period.” Jeremy promised.

So throughout the period, an internal debate was in full swing on the whole ‘joining the school play’ argument. Which was good to think about, or at least better than the whole ‘Michael might’ve found me out’ problem.

But for one, he probably wouldn’t get too important a role, and maybe he could pitch into the tech-crew instead, (even if that wasn’t what Christine wanted).

Secondly, if he joined the play, he could spend more time with Christine, and make her happy too — they were friends, yeah, but it was still a rocky, new alliance between them. This would secure his spot as Christine’s friend.

Third, of course, the crush thing. He didn’t know Christine that well to have a crush on her (which was the assumption he made up), but maybe if he got to know her more, something would happen.

And fourth, and yeah, he wouldn’t admit it— maybe joining the play would impress Michael. Since it was something spontaneous and new from Jeremy.

Yeah of course there were the other, minute reasons like ‘hey, you should try things like these in high-school and experiment with things you’re not comfortable with’, and ‘you might find a lot of passion’ there, but he was mostly concerned socially.

Of course he was, that’s all Jeremy has ever been concerned about.

But there were also a lot of reasons not to, too many to name, so he listened to each side while also balancing his viola.

Sometime during Band, Jeremy felt a buzz go off in his pocket, but even if he noticed it, his hands were too busy wrapped around his viola and its bow, so he couldn’t pay it much mind.

He tried to keep his focus on the sheet music in front of him, in lieu of the irking urge to check his phone, but it ate away at him.

Jeremy knew better than to get his hopes up though. Wouldn’t be the first time today that a notification Jeremy hoped would be from Michael ended up being an HQ invite or Clash Royale update.

So he kept his spirits low and debated himself on the more pressing matters.

By the end of the period, Jeremy thought he had Christine’s answer.

‘No’, because he was nervous about his acting skills, ‘no’, because he wasn’t confident, ‘no’ because he’s unusually pessimistic due to his low self-esteem and ‘no’, because he doesn’t want to humiliate himself.

But as the two (well, actually four of them. Jake Dillinger— yeah, the Jake Dillinger— and Brooke Lohst followed them down the hall) to the sign-up sheet, he looked at it wistfully.
Something about it was just calling his name. Christine was the first to sign, then Brooke, then Jake.

Then Christine looked to Jeremy with an excitable smile, and he had his answer.

An impulsive answer, but still, an answer.

So he walked over, braced himself with a sharp, forcibly sucked-in inhale, and wrote his name under the fifth spot on the board for the afterschool play.

Some teenagers get pressured drinking, or drugs, or rebelling, Jeremy got pressured into high-school theatre.

No ambush of jerks rushed in, no one called him a gay slur or laughed, and nobody threatened him. In fact, before the three others walked off, they actually looked proud of him.

Jake actually fucking fist-bumped him (which he complied with, hesitantly), Brooke, who didn’t usually say much, blushed at him and whisked herself away with the crowd, and Christine hugged him ecstatically— like him signing up for the play had been on her bucket list for years.

Christine is cute, Christine is smart, Christine is witty.

But she’s not Michael.

Jeremy misses Michael.

So after the Band-mates left, Jeremy just kind of stood there for a second, he looking at the bulletin board in front of him. He could’ve joined so many other clubs, other teams or committees.

But Jeremy Heere’s name was scrawled on one sheet in front of him, a sheet for the after-school play, and he didn’t know whether that was a mistake or not.

If anything bad happens, you could always just quit. she, Christine, told him, and she was a good voice of reason for someone who was generally so energetic and opinionated.

He clenched his fist, and silently deliberated whether or not he should scratch it out.

No, because this could be good for you, no, because your friends are impressed that you did this, no, because you and Christine could get close, no, because Michael might like it.

Oh, shit— Michael. He’d forgot to check his phone.

How the fuck did he forget to check his phone?

Jeremy unclenched his fist, and plied his eyes away from the board, leaving his name untouched.

By then, hallways were mostly emptied, so he scrambled into his pocket to pull out his phone while absentmindedly walking to the atrium for study hall.

No big scary seniors to duck away from. Good, that’s how life should be.

Jeremy sat down on one of the lonesome benches in the atrium. They had an outdoor courtyard too, but it was probably too hot out for Jeremy’s standards.

So he shrugged that idea off, and opened his phone.
Jeremy cracked a smile, the deadweight on his chest a lot less heavier. So Michael wasn’t dead, so he wasn’t ignoring him, so he hadn’t found out yet.


“Jeremy Deere ; Lol are you sick or smth man?  Today at 1:53”

“Michael Mellon ; holy shit how long was i out for?  Today at 1:29”

“Michael Mellon ; ha ha, yeah... sorry, i should’ve messaged you when mom woke me up this morning, but i legit just passed out as soon as she left, i think i got a cold or smth.  Today at 1:54”

“Michael Mellon ; are you okay though? was today fine w/o me, registered favourite person of Jeremy Heere?  Today at 1:54”

Jeremy giggled, breaking an ear-to-ear smile. Someone was probably wondering what this freak was so happy about seeing on his phone, but he didn’t care, he cupped his chin with one of his hands, and typed back immediately.

“Jeremy Deere ; Yeah today wasn’t too great, I didn’t have anyone’s math notes to steal but i’m okay now, thank you 4 asking.  Today at 1:54”

Michael hardly even said anything, and somehow, Jeremy’s day was at least six times better than it’d been. He’d have to write down this ecstatic feeling later, but right now he couldn’t be bothered.

He knew his cheeks were pink and that was fine, he knew he was clutching his phone in his talons like a hawk would its prey and that was fine. Michael turned Jeremy into an anxiety-free zone, so frankly, he could care less.

“Michael Mellon ; aw, anything else happen today? do u need cat gifs to cheer u up?  Today at 1:54”

“Jeremy Deere ; Mmm, maybe soon but i’m bouta rant sooo  Today at 1:54”
Jeremy’s hands were fast on the small keyboard, but to be fair, he’s been deprived of this venting luxury all day. He missed Michael, okay? So he’ll take advantage of this for now, call him selfish, sue him, he didn’t care.

“Jeremy deere; okay SO I’m gonna start like, least to most interesting. Today in Geometry I could not focus to save my life anddd like, Harper called on me and I just did not respond at all?? And so after the class she asked to have a word with me and shes like UUUUH do you need to go to the NURSE, young man u were zoned out all period?! And of course I’m like no stfu, but like it just ended up making me feel worse b/c I was already really anxious and I don’t want to answer her questions about it so I just found it rude how she approached me like that and didn’t let me go to class. Today at 1:58”

Yeah, he wasn’t the most eloquent, sure, but it’d suffice for Michael. He didn’t need to be anything special when he was with Michael, he was grateful for just Jeremy.

That fact alone made him feel like the most special person on the planet. If he ever gets around to confessing to Michael (which he won’t, but hypothetically), he’d show his gratitude with a thousand kisses.

“michael mellon; wait  Today at 2:00”

“michael mellon; what were u so anxious abt?  Today at 2:00”

Jeremy swallowed his heart, he hadn’t even noticed how loud it’d been beating in his ears until everything else in his head turned to silence. Instead of letting it spill out, he tried to make his reasoning seem as professionally platonic as possible.

“Jeremy deere ; Uh basically how u slept in so late I got worried that u were like, dead or something lol. Today at 2:01”

“michael mellon ; oh mk well im not dead so continue  Today at 2:01”  (A relief)

“Jeremy deere ; anyway also rich sat with me at lunch which was fucking crazy no one expected this in ten years. And he’s like, ‘So like Jake wants to know more people, so if you and Michael wanna sit with us tomorrow you can. (Jeremy made sure to leave out his ribald comment on their
“michael mellon ; w8 Rich? like rich goranski rich?  Today at 2:04”

“jeremy deere ; No the other Rich yEAH THAT ONE  Today at 2:04”

“michael mellon ; wtf? is he scamming u?  Today at 2:04”

“jeremy deere ; Idk!! It’s Rich and like, he brought me to the nurse’s office that one time because I looked sick so I think I can trust him but I’m skeptical too?  Today at 2:05”

“michael mellon ; are we taking up on his offer?  Today at 2:06”

“jeremy deere ; if you want to man, I think it’d be cool to check out? I’m pretty sure he meant Jake Dillinger as like, THE Jake, and he’s in my Band class, and you’d be surprised how nice he is.  Plus like, maybe we could get Cooler b/c of it?  Today at 2:06”

“michael mellon ; alright then sure, but if things go to shit im dragging both of us outta there, im just worried they’re gonna fuck us over  Today at 2:07”

“jeremy deere ; Michael, knight in shining armor, protecc  Today at 2:07” (Okay, seriously Jeremy? Did you just call him a ‘knight in shining armor’? Tone it down)

“michael mellon ; thats me, also, anythign else happen today?  Today at 2:08”

“jeremy deere ; oh! Oh!!!!! MIIIIIIIIIIIIIICHAEEEL GUESS WHAT  Today at 2:08”

“michael mellon ; what happened jer  Today at 2:08”

“jeremy deere ; I SIGNED UP FOR THE SCHOOL PLAY  Today at 2:08”
Jeremy felt some glower of pride creep up his face, suddenly, he wasn’t regretting signing up. No doubt about it, he would trump this play thing and Michael would watch him do it.

“jeremy deere ; YES Today at 2:09”

“michael mellon ; DUDE THATS AMAZIGN Today at 2:09”

“michael mellon ; fhajkgdkjsjlakfhaw Today at 2:09”

“michael mellon ; thaTS MY BOY Today at 2:09”

Whoa. Alright, calm down hormones, those tingles aren’t platonic, and they’re supposed to be.

“michael mellon ; wait why Today at 2:10”

“jeremy deere ; oh yeah, well Christine from band kept like asking me to, and Jake and Brooke also sit near us and they signed up too, so I sort of got like, peer-pressured to sign up, but like it wasn’t cocaine or anything so Today at 2:10”

A beat, then two long minutes passed in tow. There’s Jeremy’s anxiety, predatorily encroaching back into his fluttery stomach again, but that’s not new. Jeremy couldn’t accept simple, realistic possibilities, like Michael having to brush his teeth or change into some clothes, it had to be a complete change of atmosphere, it had to have some deeper meaning to him.

“michael mellon ; do you like christine? Today at 2:13”
Okay maybe he was right about that mood shift thing.

Because something about the question felt kind of intimate. Whether it was the timing or the fact that Michael actually bothered to add punctuation, something about the message felt so personal.

And Jeremy was stumped on what to tell him, because really, there were two paths here.

The answer should be obvious, tell him the truth, say you don’t like Christine that way, because that’s what you feel. In reality, Michael couldn’t be more wrong in suspecting Christine as Jeremy’s crush.

But then he could also lie. Jeremy could cover up his tracks and assure Michael that he doesn’t like him in a more-than-platonic way. Jeremy has been hoping some crush on Christine would arise anyways, so it wouldn’t be the biggest stretch to just say he already does. Only so Michael wouldn’t suspect a thing.

Still, that felt oddly betraying, and dispiriting to say that— to just, remove that slim change he had.

Jeremy’s always been indecisive, so he picked both.

“jeremy deere ; idk?? Not really but she’s cool?? Today at 2:14”

“michael mellon ; oh mk then  Today at 2:14”

“jeremy deere ; Why do you ask aha? Today at 2:15”

Because he just couldn’t just not ask that.

“michael mellon ; i dunno, how much of a best friend would i be if i didn’t know who my main man’s crushing on  Today at 2:15”

Jeremy scoffed at that. There was some thick, musty air— despite being miles apart— between them right now, and he couldn’t neglect it.

You won’t ever know who I’m crushing on.

He wondered if Michael felt it too.

“jeremy deere ; I’m not crushing on anyone rn I think lol  Today at 2:16”
He wasn’t a great liar, even over text. Funny, theatre was all about lying to an audience, so yeah, he probably won’t do well in it, but Jeremy didn’t let his eyes linger to the bulletin board again. He wouldn’t back down after telling everybody.

Jeremy could tell through the hesitance in Michael’s back-and-forth message drafts that he really wanted to say something about the ‘I think’ part. Or at least, that was his assumption, because even through his phone screen, he could tell Michael was staring quizzically back at him, thinking about what to say.

“michael mellon ; well anyway, nothing else happen? Today at 2:19”

“jeremy deere ; Nah, what’s popping with you? Today at 2:19”

For the rest of Jeremy’s study hall, conversation resumed as normal. The thick air dissolved, but the colour in his cheeks didn’t. All Jeremy had to do was choke down the feeling of regret he had in signing up for the play, but that was easy when Michael distracted him.

When school was dismissed at two forty-five, he was grateful to not have to see his name, written in the same shaky, dripping ink on the board anymore. It seemed like all of his study hall it was there, taunting him, while he deliberated scratching it out.

Jeremy took the bus home, and on it, he didn’t sit with anyone. Though Brooke Lohst did make some conversation about the school play from the seat behind his. She was a sweet girl, blonde hair, green-ish blue eyes, pastel cardigans.

But if he’s honest, Jeremy didn’t focus on her much. His hands didn’t leave his phone, texting up until Michael had to retire to go have a shower.
meant to be broken

Chapter Notes

holy sjhit! i have not updated in like, six days, so thank you so much for your patience! this chapter was a doozy, and really i’m still not happy with how it turned out.

okay so quick explanation, over the course of this week the reason i’ve been so late to upload is
1) finding inspiration to actually write, like that's dummy hard for some reason?
2) this kinda goes with 1 but like, for a lot of this chapter i had mad writer's block
3) this chapter is my longest one so far
4) i’ve been trying to adjust my sleep schedule, so that's really been fucking me over here

anyway, enough of that! enjoy this chapter and thank you again for your patience and support for this story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You know what? Friday started out fine.

For what would later be known as one of the craziest days in Jeremy’s high-school career, the day began fine, chill, and normal.

Like normal, Jeremy missed his bus, and he had to wake a begrudging Mr Heere up to drive him.

Like normal, Middleborough’s hallways and teachers were unforgiving to teenagers with anxiety.

Like normal, classes droned by slowly, fluorescent lights were too bright and fluorescent, bells were too loud, and just like normal, Michael (thank God) showed up to school.

(Apparently he wasn’t allowed to miss more than one day of school according to his mom, which both he and pretty much every kid in his seven classes were pretty irritated with, since intermittently, he’d throw his head into his elbow pits to cough out his lungs like a lifelong smoker.

It was sad to see him succumb to natural human weaknesses, like illness. Things Jeremy dealt with all the time— his immune system was shit, apparently his white blood cells never learned how to fight— so he should be laughing at Michael for all the jokes he’s made about Jeremy’s sickness.

But instead, out of pity, he let Michael speed-copy the homework he half-arsed yesterday night for Geometry and History.

Yes, Jeremy had sent him the required pages and questions, but Michael apparently just ‘didn’t get around to doing it’.

Still, Jeremy— who might only be bending the rules because he’s lovesick for the damned boy—
allowed him minutes of frantic copying just so he could evade some classic public humiliation by their teachers.

In third, Michael’s doctor’s note dictated he sit out for Phys. Ed due to something about his throat being too congested for activity.

That was fine though, because all they did today was tennis, a sport Jeremy was actually very good at, thank you very much)

Nothing unusual, right? The day was fine. There was the regular wonted amount of bittersweet, lovestruck dizziness, some customary snide glances towards Jeremy in the hallway, and the accustomed feelings of boredom throughout his morning.

Everything was usual, the day was fine, up until the bell for the lunch hour (really, it was only forty minutes, but who cares) sounded. That’s when it things first started getting… weird.

Out from Chemistry, Rich excitedly escorted Jeremy down to the cafeteria, apparently staying true to the promise Jeremy thought he hallucinated yesterday.

There, at the doors, the two rendezvoused with Michael. His sickness had been dwindling since the first bell rang, and he looked impressively less-dead than when Jeremy last saw him in Gym.

That said, his voice was still stuffy and a little too deep. Not a good too deep either.

Well maybe a good too deep, but that was only because the body attached to the voice was Michael, but whatever, okay? Jeremy didn’t want to focus on that right now, because he was being dragged roughly by the shoulder by five-foot-three-inches of teenage bully, and Michael was trailing behind them with very worried eyes directed on how tight Rich’s grip was.

Frankly, Rich could probably snap one of Jeremy’s bones right here right now if he really tried, but neither Michael nor Jeremy were going to challenge him on it.

Sometimes, Jeremy glanced back at Michael with an animated look in his eyes that basically read Yeah this is totally a set-up. We’re fucked.

But they didn’t fight, they just let him take the reigns, shimmying through cramped aisles until he stopped at a table with surprisingly less people than either Michael or Jeremy were expecting (but were grateful for, because both of them had issues around large crowds).

A long bench in the far right of the cafeteria, with four lazy teenagers posed on the seats.

Jeremy was perplexed, skeptical still, but perplexed, because there’s Jake Dillinger, sitting with his knees on either side of the bench seat. He was talking with both another nearby table of goons while also hushedly whispering to Chloe Valentine. She sat beside him and was clinging to one of his arms.

She was a face almost anyone at the school recognized, fawned over, and feared. She pulled the strings at this school anywhere she pleased.

Her hair was thirteen inches of curled, balayaged hotness, her lips were plumply filled and overlined, and her outfits were fashionable and idealized.

The girl everyone wanted to be or wanted to be with. Dating one of the most popular guys in her grade, and she could probably, if she wanted to, entrance some senior boy toy— and they have cars up in senior year.
So Chloe Valentine was basically a boy— and chick— magnet.

Coincidentally sitting on her left was Brooke Lohst, who looked like a victim of said magnet, staring at her a little too longingly, like a lost puppy.

The thought did cross Jeremy’s mind; *Jesus, is that how I look at Michael?* But he swallowed it down and warded it away with a long sniff of some sweet citrus scent wafting through the air. Jake was eating mandarins.

Jeremy knew Brooke pretty well from Band already, but taking an uneasy look at her helped a memory recur from yesterday like some sort of nostalgia, when she blushed and smiled shyly at him.

Pretty, but Jeremy didn’t remember the last time he heard her speak. She always seemed so insecure, even sat in her seat right now, she looked a little wary and unsettled.

Brooke really had no reason to feel insecure, but Jeremy would be hypocritical for saying that, because Michael told him the same thing and he never listened.

Anyway, there was also Jenna there, across the table from Brooke.

Her full name was Jenna Rolan, but Jeremy has only ever heard it before in the ‘Works Cited’ page on the gossip spiels from Rich and (not) also from some of his eavesdropping sessions in the boy’s changeroom.

Jeremy blinked in disbelief. There was something tapping his shoulder.

“Helloo? Jeremy? Say hi, jackass, I’m gonna go get something to drink.” Rich said, and Jeremy realized that persistent, harsh tapping on his shoulder was Rich’s finger.

He swatted Rich’s hand away and let his eyes fall to the table.

There was Jake, again, obviously, in the same spot he was just a couple of minutes ago, but this time he was looking up at him. Jake Dillinger’s attention was on Jeremy Heere, of all people. “Oh, oh! Sorry. Hi, I’m Jeremy.”

Jake’s face cracked, amused apparently by the boy teeming with nervousness and insecurity. His smile was artfully crafted and his teeth looked almost too white, like artificially white, especially for their age. There was probably a conspiracy theory somewhere about it if Jeremy asked around.

“Jake.” he responded calmly, and with some sudden, frustrated gesturing from Rich’s hands, Jeremy was basically shoved down into the seat across from Jake.

“Oh! Rich, I got two dollars, can you get me some grape soda?” Brooke peeped after plucking two bills from her pocket and fluffing them in Rich’s face.

He nodded assuringly (baring those untrustworthy, menacing shark teeth again. Jeremy wasn’t sure whether or not he’d just steal the two dollars and run or not) then walked away.

Great idea, leaving some prey of Middleborough with its lions.

Michael spent a little too much time watching Rich walk off before he awkwardly shrugged and egged Jeremy to move over towards the centre of the table— to which of course, he obliged.

“Yo, I’m Michael.” he said, taking that seat on the end of the bench beside Jeremy.
It’s obvious to Jeremy that he wasn’t near as relaxed as he looked. There was tension in his highly-hung shoulders that gave away his discomfort.

Jeremy scooted a little closer to him to where their legs were touching, because that usually works in calming him down.

Plus, Jeremy just wanted some proximity. It helped him relax too.

So he ignored the heat radiating off Michael, he ignored how it seeps into his skin and makes his cheeks turn pink, and he burrowed himself into a rational mindset instead, forcibly sighing the love out from his lungs.

Brooke’s eyes phased back down to Michael (though, with how short Rich is, it wasn’t too much of a difference) and smiled. “Oh hi, I’m Brooke. I didn’t even see you there, sorry.”

Her words sounded like something that should be sarcastic and sassy, but the genuineness in Brooke’s eyes was too sweet to be passive-aggressive.

“’m Chloe.” her perfectly-manicured majesty said. Chloe straightened her back and sipped on some thick, pink paste from a nearby smoothie bar, one of her arms still entangled with Jake’s.

(Hadn’t lunch just started? How did she get there and back from the smoothie bar down the road so quickly?)

Jeremy had bigger things to worry about, for instance, he’s yet to figure out what the fuck was going on.

Because the whole situation was so foreign. Was Jeremy experiencing some sort of mass hysteria, was he hallucinating, dreaming, in a coma? Should he call an ambulance? Here were the popular kids. Shouldn’t they be you know, making fun of him right now?

They weren’t. They were failing at their only jobs.

Jeremy tried to rewind to some point in time where he proved himself deserving to be sitting here. Did he badmouth a teacher? Did he accidentally make fun of another nerd? Who recently died so Jeremy could take their place in this seat? Seriously, there was nothing Jeremy did.

He was still a nobody, someone who even when embarrassed over and over again, never made the school’s gossip grapevine. He was that much of a nobody. It was like getting the valedictorian award with a straight C report card. The dots didn’t connect.

Though they were grateful, Michael and Jeremy definitely weren’t letting their guard down just yet, and it showed. Tense shoulders, fixed gazes and high chins, like they were warriors on night watch, hunched over a fire and squashing any itch for sleep because they had to be on guard for an attack.

“Lighten up guys, we’re not gonna kill you.” Chloe said, but the ring in her voice was completely contradictory.

Jeremy was also sure Jenna Rolan nodded too, but when he looked back over to her, she looked too immersed into the depths of iMessage and Twitter to have even heard Chloe.

Okay, weird.

Michael’s eyes met Jeremy’s. He was equally as quizzical, but for some reason, his ‘questioning
Jeremy was then rudely reminded of when he blanked out that one Saturday and lost them that level (which since then, they’ve beaten, but Jeremy still cringes at the memory) because Michael’s focus-face was simply too attractive.

Ugh. He pushed that down and shook himself back into reality. No way he’d get distracted during an attempt at leveling up again. This time the game they were apparently playing was a new copy of ‘The Climb Up Middleborough’s Social Ladder II’ and the zombies were strict teachers and school bullies.

Speaking of school bullies, Rich just walked right past Jeremy, slid the grape soda can down the bench to Brooke’s spot, and took a seat beside Jake.

Brooke purred happily as she opened her can with a sizzling Pop!

“So then, uhm, why are we here?” Jeremy asked— and of course he wasn’t complaining— but he hardly knew these people. Hell, he revered these people, everyone did, and now he’s sitting with them? Knowing how the universe has treated Jeremy before, golden opportunities like these don’t come so often, and not without a price.

Thinking still that this was probably just a prank, that at some point Michael and him were going to get drums of water or corn syrup or something poured on their heads for all the school to watch and laugh, Jeremy hunched over skeptically, nursing a bottle of chocolate milk (his pleasure drink) in his hands.

If something did happen, the chocolate milk would be the first thing Jeremy spared. So he hid it in his lap and tightly screwed back on the cap.

But something didn’t look like it would happen. Whenever Jeremy looked over to the five beloved elites, they all looked too kind or lazy enough to be considered threats. No one was giving anyone a ‘go’ signal.

False sense of security, Jeremy, of course they’re not going to tell you that you’re about to be humiliated New Jersey-wide.

“These losers said you two were alright, and everyone else is so fake, you know?” Chloe said, and her eyes warmed around Jake, Rich, and Brooke. It was the first time Jeremy heard someone on her social tier use the word ‘loser’ affably.

Jeremy has had a long, personal history with the word loser. It’s a tired-out, trite insult at this point, all his bullies desensitized him to it last year. Now he just uses it as a joke with Michael.

“So we just said fuck it. And hi, now we’re here, what’s up?” Jake finished, and despite the fact that it was totally creepy how he just continued Chloe’s thought (the deeper corners of Jeremy’s mind said that it proved his conspiracy. This was definitely a set-up and they’ve definitely rehearsed all this), he nodded slowly. Still adjusting.

“N-not much, I guess.” Jeremy said, and he allowed a smile to quirk up at either corner of his lips — making sure it didn’t look too pouty, twitchy or uncomfortable first. “How are you?”

God, he’s so awkward when he’s nervous, but there beside him is Michael, and now that boy, that boy, was rubbing circles into the middle of Jeremy’s back. A feeling and hand that he helplessly leaned into.
Even through his shirt, the sensation was tingly and comforting and Jeremy had to force away all un-platonic thoughts about it. Jeremy noticed Michael was humming, but he didn’t have his headphones in or anything. Jeremy couldn’t hear the song over the general noise of the cafeteria either.

“Mmn. Mothimm’ much.” Jake replied, though his voice was slurred by the fact that his tongue was now stuck out of his mouth. He placed another quarter of his mandarin on it before he sucked both his tongue and the mandarin into his mouth cave, like a frog.

Two things were proven, one, that mandarin was never to be seen again, and two, Jake Dillinger is kind of a dork who doesn’t know how to properly eat fruit.

Could a popular jock be a dork? Was that an option?

Meanwhile, Rich seemed to be minding his business, trying to pry open the tab to his soda but failing miserably. His nails were trimmed (or bitten, Jeremy would guess, but he couldn’t see from across the table) way too short, and his fingers just pressed up against the top of the can pathetically, never being able to get enough leverage to open it.

“Ugh. You’re hopeless.” Jenna drawled, grabbing the coke herself and effortlessly opening it for him. The gratitude that dawned on his face was exaggerated and dramatic, but it made Brooke giggle like a little kid, so it was worthwhile.

Jeremy couldn’t help but feel very out of place. Of course, he was still welcomed in he and Michael’s bubble, but at this table? He was at a loss of words, he didn’t really know how to talk to these people. So, he just watched them and ate, letting the focus make its rounds around the table, only pitching in to conversation occasionally.

Still getting comfortable around them, and still on look-out for whether or not this was all a sham.

At some point, he probably zoned out. Maybe he did, maybe he didn’t, but he didn’t remember life before Rich turned to him with prowling eyes and asked;

“Hey, so are you two dating or what?”

That’s the story of how Jeremy forgot how to breathe. Because holy shit, Rich. People don’t just ask that, right?

So this was how they were going to humiliate him, good to know. This was their torture and execution method. Jenna Rolan probably has a camera directed at them right now. Cool, nice, Jeremy’s insides aren’t on fire. He can totally breathe right now and isn’t choking on thin air.

Michael saw Jeremy’s silence, he realized how badly the boy was freaking out, and maybe he felt guilty, maybe he wanted to diffuse the situation, and normally he’d be really good at that.

“Me and Jeremy? Are you kidding? No, never, we’re not dating.” Michael reprimanded harshly, and ouch.

That hurt. Not just his words, but the venom in his voice, the conviction— like he was offended.

Maybe Jeremy had just been already vulnerable, being in a foreign situation with a bunch of Middleborough socialites he didn’t know— but that, those stupid words, prompted him into anxiety-attack territory.

Almost immediately, his breathing became too sharp and too shallow, like thin pieces of glass cut
his throat. His stomach twisted with disgust, and in reflex, he nervously scooted little ways away from Michael.

He was Jeremy’s only place for refuge, but he was also what Jeremy was running away from in the first place. Jeremy naturally gravitated towards him, but resisted the pull. Being any closer to Michael right now would only make this worse.

Maybe he didn’t mean to make it sound so awful. Maybe he isn’t actually that repulsed by dating me. His brain spluttered out weakly, but too late. It took all the willpower that boy had left to not frown, to not ask for some clarification that he was so desperate for.

You don’t mean that, right?

He couldn’t choke the words out if he tried. It was so simple a denial, but it’s all Jeremy needed to hear to reinforce reality in his head.

Michael wasn’t interested in him, whether he was gay or not. It’s something Jeremy subliminally understood, but never fully accepted because of a stupid, small chance that Michael actually did, or could someday like him back. A small chance that Jeremy prayed on, a small chance that only naïve casino-goers would dare to bet on.

A small chance that Jeremy was gullible enough to have faith in; a small chance he pretended was a lot larger than it actually was.

A small chance that he still, now, didn’t give up. That’s why he hurt so much, because he still was crushing on Michael, he was just hurt, realizing his odds at ever getting more were so slim and fragile.

If Jeremy wasn’t so anxious, maybe he wouldn’t of taken Michael’s words so harshly, but his thoughts had already started running amok. No saving him right now.

You should’ve accepted fate before you were forced to, Jeremy. You should’ve stopped trying to bend Michael’s platonic actions into more. You knew they were platonic.

God. God. He’s such an idiot. He lead himself into this trap. He disappointed himself, making things into more, wanting things to be more. Stupid fucking Jeremy Heere ruins everything with his feelings, and his want for more.

Still, he looked to Michael like he was the only beacon of hope in a ghost town. He was still helpless for him, and the lovesick feeling was more prominent than ever. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Jeremy was crestfallen, but he swallowed the emptiness down, keeping his mouth shut so he wouldn’t say or do something regrettable, like a sarcastic ‘yeah, totally not dating’ or grabbing ahold of Michael’s hand and asking him out right here.

ONE make sure you don’t say/do anything that’ll give you away.

So he bit his lip, he toughed it out for now. He repeated the adage of ‘maybe he doesn’t mean it’ in his head just to hold him off, and inched his body a little closer towards Michael’s. Maybe Jeremy was a fool for not gutting out every smidge of hope in his chest, but it was still there. Mangled, but there.
Jeremy’s head nodded a little too violently, almost slamming against the table, and God, he wish it
did. Blacking out seemed pretty ideal right now, Jeremy didn’t know what he was feeling or how to
contain it.

“Not dating.” he confirmed through near-gritted teeth. No one understood, no one saw or realized
Jeremy’s behaviour, or even if they did, no one mentioned it. No one bothered to ask if he was
alright, and that was fine.

It stung when Michael wrapped his arm around Jeremy’s waist. The sentiment was wasted, but he
still caved into it.

Jeremy flinched under his touch. It felt like poison leaching into his skin, but he liked it. Why did
he like it? Did he have a death wish?

Apparently so.

It didn’t hurt as much as it should. Maybe because Jeremy had already come to terms with the fact
that he’d never tell Michael, that it was silly to crush on your best friend, and that Michael would
never feel the same way. But it still hurt to hear his crush outright deny the possibility.

At some point, he realized that Michael was shaking, and albeit confused as to why, Jeremy
impulsively ran his hand up and down Michael’s back to soothe him.

His hand felt heavy, but Jeremy reminded himself that his friendship with Michael mattered more
than anything right now. That he wouldn’t get around to telling Michael anyway, that Michael
wouldn’t feel the same way even if he did, that his feelings were just feelings, that they’d be gone
soon, and if they weren’t, he’d learn how to deal with them completely.

Right now Michael was probably also hurting too. The air felt heavy. His back was twitchy, and
Jeremy noticed that under the table, Michael’s hands, posed on his knees, were tightly clenched.

So he ignored the pain, blinked away his bleary waterline, and tried to make Michael comfortable.

Though, some stupid voice in his head wouldn’t stop talking about how Michael being nervous
right now meant something more.

_Shut up, we’re done with the hope thing, he has social anxiety too and that’s why._

“Awe, s’hard to believe with how close you two are all the time.” Brooke interjected, and Jeremy,
frankly, agreed with her. He didn’t say anything, because his throat was stiff and his emotions
cluttered.

This all hurt, but they couldn’t see, of course they couldn’t see, Michael couldn’t even see.

If he saw, he would hate Jeremy, or at least things would be awkward, and things between them
were never supposed to be awkward. Eleven years of friendship down, and he wasn’t going to spoil
it.

So all Michael could see was some boy worried about his social status— in reality, the least of
Jeremy’s worries. He didn’t even hear everyone else talking anymore, he wasn’t even looking at
them, his eyes stayed on Michael.

And Jeremy, a boy with no self-preservation instinct, dug himself deeper into his grave, and
pressed himself against Michael’s shoulder, leaning his head onto his collar.
He didn’t know if Michael meant it. He wanted to believe he didn’t, but Jeremy was too pessimistic to think that right now.

“Y’sure about the not-dating thing there Mikey boy?” Rich taunted, and Michael smirked. Jeremy felt too much satisfaction in his smug smile, he was too protective of someone who was just his best friend. It hurt.

That nostalgic feeling of warmth Jeremy was craving wasn’t there, he just didn’t feel it. Michael didn’t feel like the Sun Jeremy knew right now.

But he clutched tighter around the Sun’s sweatshirt, and held him a little closer. They were both freaking out, but for different reasons. That’s what hurt so much.

Jeremy didn’t speak out. He didn’t do much for the rest of the lunch hour, actually. He let the feeling rot in his stomach and listened as conversations came and went.

The anxiety died down after a while, and Jeremy sunk into a light depression. It wasn’t too bad, but the soft ache in his chest leached onto him, restricting him from talking, restricting him from having fun. He put on a façade, rode as a passenger, and dealt with his feelings internally.

It was fine, though. He needed to learn how to deal with them anyways. So while Jeremy tried to pitch into conversations, he mostly just murmured and answered group queries, never wanting to take the stage because he wasn’t exactly stable enough to.

He buried those feelings just for the lunch hour. Like zombies, they were definitely going to rise up later, and he’d have to fight them back down, because they simply wouldn’t die.

Huh. Zombies and feelings, more similar than he’d thought.

The end-of-lunch hour bell was more of a relief than Jeremy was expecting.

Somehow, he and Michael managed leaving a good impression on the popular kids before everyone was dismissed from the cafeteria, so that was good, it meant one less thing he had to worry about.

But at least, now, he could finally drop the façade, if only for a few minutes between classes.

Normally he’d hate the short hallway intermissions between classes because apparently every other kid who went to this school was a negligent jerk, inconsiderate about how other people existed, but today it was different.

Today Jeremy was the negligent, unaware jerk. He didn’t care about the weird glances, or the hushed comments that were probably about him, he just rode with the throng of students down the hall.

He didn’t walk with Michael today.

Maybe Jeremy was too sad to care, still fixed on the stupid heaviness in his heart, but he hung his head low and ignored everyone on his way to class.
Oh, shit. Geometry. Me and Michael share that class.

It couldn’t hurt to be late though. So, when he passed it, Jeremy swerved into the accessible restroom.

He needed to freshen up, take a couple of minutes just to relax, just to breathe and find his conscience again. He locked the door and found himself slunk to the ground with his back pressed onto the wall.

The air was cleaner and nicer-smelling in there than it was out in the hall. Probably due to all the freshman who didn’t understand the value of a good deodorant, or because the accessible bathroom had about three different air-fresheners in it.

The accessible restroom was always treated better than the regular ones, but Jeremy just guessed it was easier to clean. Either way, the cleanliness of it all helped clear Jeremy’s head just a little bit more.

He’s biting his lip anxiously, the heaviness was petering out of his chest with every deep sigh, but he couldn’t deny the hole it left.

Jeremy replayed the sound and venom of Michael’s voice in his head. It stung, but the pain wasn’t as bad anymore. Still, his waterline pricked from hearing the words ring around his head again.

He felt distraught, he felt a little emptier, and even if that hope was still there, buried in his chest, it was maimed badly and somehow now inside out. Still alive, though. If the crush was there, the hope was there, and for some reason, Jeremy just couldn’t let go of his damned-to-hell crush on Michael Mell.

He fell hard for the boy, okay? He didn’t ask for this. It’s been what, a month or so since his initial freak-out about it and hey, look, here he is in the bathroom! Freaking out about it, again. Jeremy was starting to think that Michael was purposely being perfect just for some twisted human experiment.

That sounded crazy, though, ‘purposely being perfect’, tch. Michael’s behaviour and demeanor was effortless and sly. A natural at being perfect, wasn’t he? Asshole.

They say nobody’s perfect, but Michael was pretty damn close in Jeremy’s opinion.

Maybe not the Coolest, maybe not the most fashionable or the most selfless, but he was a well-rounded concoction of so many traits and quirks and things that all blended together seamlessly.

So it hurt when Michael said that thing earlier, alright? He’d just looked so repulsed by the mere prospect of dating Jeremy that it shattered the boy, sue Jeremy for having feelings, whatever.

A crush was a crush and when that crush basically denies any chance with you, it’ll hurt. Even when you’ve already (kind of) accepted fate.

He wasn’t so sure of how long he just sat haplessly on the ground. He didn’t remember hearing the start-of-class bell or the rest of the students clamor out of the hallway, but he did remember silence.

Nothing. Nothing from inside the door, or out. It’s only after he got up and splashed water in his face did Jeremy actually hear something.

Banging, on the door. Four loud thuds, followed by a yell that, even when coming from the outside, bounced off the walls of the room soundly.
“Jeremy! Are you in there?”

It was Michael, big surprise, and Jeremy couldn’t help that he was startled. He might’ve accidentally yelped.

Fuck, he was kind of trying to hide from him right now.

In his hand he was still clutching a scrunched up piece of paper towel just incase he cried. He still felt empty, he still wanted more time to process everything. If that meant missing out on one day of Geometry, that was fine.

But he’s totally given himself away already, there was no way in hell Michael was that oblivious.

“Alright, I know it’s you Jer, can you open up?”

His suspicion was proven, Michael is not an idiot. Still, despite being amenable, Jeremy was still sad. Seeing Michael right now wasn’t exactly on his priority list.

“Jeremy can’t take your call right now, can you leave a message?” he called back through the door, his voice soft and slightly broken, but he managed to make it as loud as possible so Michael could hear.

Though, obviously, he didn’t really have to. He could hear Michael sigh through the door. “Jer, c’mon, what’s up with you? We’re best buds for God’s sake.”

Best buds. The title made him cringe, because he hated himself for wanting to be more than that. It’s always more with Jeremy, nothing was never enough apparently.

Still, it felt good to be reminded that yes, Jeremy still had Michael, he hasn't lost him yet. They were still best friends, and he could tell him anything.

Well, almost anything, but the sentiment was enough for Jeremy to budge a little. Still, he managed up enough resistance for one last attempt—

“Go away, Michael,” Jeremy tried, but it was weak. Bleeding out into his voice was his want for Michael’s comfort. Maybe he could even ask for clarification if he was ballsy enough, though right now Jeremy couldn’t even focus on that. He just felt lost, and he just wanted someone to guide him.

“Jeremy, please, open the door.”

The desperation was what pried Jeremy off the floor and to the door. Michael actually cared about him and Michael was here, out of class, somehow having found where Jeremy was hiding, just to figure out what was up.

Someone had noticed, after all.

Anyway, despite feeling, and probably looking, like some washed up shell of a boy, he swallowed his feelings and unlocked it for Michael, not opening it, but telling Michael that he could come in if he wanted to. Leaving one last warning.

But Michael didn’t care, he didn’t hesitate, he opened the door, turning over and locking it again, then shuffled over to Jeremy’s reclaimed position sunk on the floor.

He was silent as he too dropped to the floor beside Jeremy, and started kneading his hand into his
shoulder. Jeremy couldn’t help but melt into it.

They stay there, quiet, for two short minutes before Michael peeped up.

“What’s up with you, man? You’ve been acting strange since lunch,” he said, and even if his voice was soothing, Jeremy couldn’t help but notice the arm on his shoulder was trying to lull him into a faux sense of security.

It wasn’t like he didn’t already know that it was one of Michael’s inevitable questions, so he wasn’t sure why exactly he was so surprised. Jeremy fought the sick heat in his face and cemented himself still.

“It’s just something someone said.” said Jeremy, and contradictory to his meager attempts to make it seem as vague and uninteresting as possible, Michael’s head crooned a little to the left in interest.

A long pause passed before Michael tried to continue conversation. Maybe he spent the time just trying to absorb in the gravity of the situation, or the atmosphere of the room, or maybe he was just confused.

“Mmm?” Michael murmured, trying to egg Jeremy on, but it’s hopeless. The boy let his eyes droop farther down onto the floor and choked out a breath when Michael inched closer. Forlorn, sad, and not even able to talk about it.

“I don’t know. Maybe I overreacted.” Is all Jeremy continues with. It was all he could continue with, but Michael, who Jeremy now realized he was leading on, looked even more interested.

Ugh.

Unfortunately, Jeremy couldn’t find any more filler sentences to entertain him with. He just humourlessly sighed and fell back against the wall.

Michael’s eyes softened to something more sympathetic and kind. A notable look on that stupid dork, but Jeremy couldn’t lie and say he didn’t love it. It was nice on him.

Michael wrapped one of his arms around Jeremy’s shoulder, maintaining some closeness that Jeremy didn’t flinch against, and suddenly, his voice was a lot quieter.

“Jeremy,” Michael said tenderly, and yeah, now he was kneading his hand into Jeremy’s other shoulder.

Maybe he was wishing Jeremy would just lean into his lap and allow easy access to both his shoulders (since the positioning was a little awkward) and Jeremy would agree. He sort of did want to do that right now, because he’s high-strung and Michael gives nice massages.

But he warded the thought away. He wouldn’t let himself be putty in Michael’s hands, nope. He will not. That increased his odds of doing something regrettable by two hundred percent, and Michael’s made himself clear on his opinion of that.

“Can you please, just uhm, talk about it? Whatever’s bothering you?” Michael weaned hopefully, and no, Jeremy can’t talk about it.

Or, well, he really shouldn’t—and he knew that—but he does anyway. After a few minutes of quiet deliberation, Jeremy got the cogs in his brain to work just enough to provide some reasoning that wasn’t so obviously half-assed.
“Rich really needs to learn how to keep his mouth shut, you know?”

Jeremy kept his eyes skywards, off from Michael, because the boy’s deep brown eyes had a truth serum-like effect on him.

He needed to make sure to keep himself hidden and low-profile, even if that meant exaggerating some other reason to make it seem like his primary concern.

Realistically, Jeremy was only skimming his heap of anxiety, Rich’s eccentric behaviour was typical, and hadn’t really surprise him. He was known to have the filter of a curious four year old, with no bearings for what was inappropriate and what wasn’t, and that wasn’t the problem, it was just what he asked about this time that set Jeremy off.

You know, explicitly asking if they were boyfriends when Jeremy has a crush the size of Manhattan on Michael? I mean seriously, asking if they were boyfriends? In front of everybody, including Michael?

Public humiliation was definitely one of Jeremy’s priorities, but it wasn’t first right now. It was just the only one Jeremy could talk about.

“The boyfriends question?” Michael asked, and Jeremy’s unintentional wince wordlessly muttered a yes.

Michael murmured. “I guess not everybody’s taught manners,” he shrugged, and while Jeremy cracked a hesitant smile, he didn’t really know what to say.

“I— I guess it just bothered me, being in front of everyone and him saying that. I don’t know why it was such a big deal to me.”

Yes I do, I’m lying to your face right now because I love you.

Beat. Jeremy scrunched up his face.

No I don’t. Nevermind that, I’m straight.

“It bothered me too, I guess just not as much because we got those comments a lot last year and I’ve sort of become immune to them,” said Michael.

I thought I was too. “— but yeah, kind of fucked up to say that in front of all these new ass people. I think he just wanted to act cool or somethin’.” he concluded, with a shrug. It seemed like he shrugged every three seconds, but that was one of Michael’s anxious habits, so maybe he was nervous too, scrambling to provide some comfort for Jeremy.

The long silence following seemed toe-curling and unbearable, and well, a nervous Jeremy couldn’t handle it. With all the turmoil in his head, it was hard to think straight, hard to realize that the path he was going down was only getting darker, and darker, and soon would lead to a dead-end.

“Yeah, and well, that’s not the only thing that’s bothering me about it,” Jeremy said, proceeding to mentally slap himself, because oops. He shouldn’t have said anything and God, he’s kind of an idiot.

Really, Jeremy? You can’t just sit in awkward air? You have to make it worse?

His eyes wandered to Michael’s face. His head hasn’t moved— and was still leaning on the wall
with his eyes pointing towards the ceiling— but one of his eyebrow was quirked in interest, and of course it was.

Because Jeremy was an idiot who couldn’t keep his mouth shut, ugh, he’d love to get high right now just so he wouldn’t have to feel the huge spike of anxiety in his stomach; which was only getting worse, by the way, as the silence went from awkward to inquisitive and tightly-knit.

“Oh? Then what’s up man? Spill.”

Jeremy breathed, fidgeting with his hands to calm his nerves. Everything in him was heavy with adrenaline, and by now, his heartbeat had turned into a percussion of irregular thumps.

He didn’t even try to fight his mouth this time. He knew he wouldn’t win.

“I, erm, do— do you really think nobody would uhm, date me?” Jeremy asked, and his voice was apparently fast and pained. Cool, now he sounded desperate on top of his panic, great.

He was walking on the edges, on thin lines and tightropes right now, so of course he sounded desperate, Jeremy was pretty stressed. One mishap and everything would come crashing down. Every feeling or thought he’s been having for a month would be revealed, every attempt at hiding it would be wasted, and eleven years of friendship would be marred with awkwardness.

But Michael’s face just softened— in juxtaposition to Jeremy’s hard, defensive features— because he didn’t know any more than what Jeremy lead on. “Is that what this is about?”

No, no it’s not, but it’s the closest I can get to some clarity here, so it’ll have to fucking do.

Jeremy nodded. Some knot twisted in his throat, so he was never able to confirm his lies in words, and he surrendered trying. His voice would probably falter and crack.

“It’s just you— you earlier, you made it sound like, like dating me would be awful, and you know me better than anyone. D’you think I’d be a bad boyfriend for someone?” Jeremy spluttered, and really, he itched to say more, ask more, but he suppressed it and tethered himself to reality.

For instance, in reality, Michael’s face has contorted, and he actually looked surprised for once, on top of his concern. “Oh, Jeremy, that’s not what I meant at all man.” started Michael, notably relaxing into the wall. “You’d probably be a kickass boyfriend.”

Something wicked twisted under Jeremy’s ribcage, because Michael still thought he meant someone else’s boyfriend.

He ignored it because Michael was just trying to be a good bro, giving him a pep-talk through dumb, teenage struggles.

“I dunno man, ‘s just, I said that because I know you’re super… protective, of your sexuality. And I just didn’t want to offend you.”

Jeremy’s throat garbled out a confused noise before he could stop it. *Oh well.*

Better get an answer if Jeremy’s mouth is just gonna move on its own now, so he might as well just ask. “What d’you mean?” asked Jeremy.

“I mean like, you’ve always really protective about being straight, like maybe not recently, but it hasn’t really come up recently—”
"— but like— do you not remember? All throughout middle-school, man, you were the ‘no homo’ friend, the ‘sorry, I’m straight’ friend,”

Michael took a pause from this oddly passionate speech on Jeremy’s sexuality to do a double-take to the boy. Jeremy looked very interested in the topic, like he’s been oblivious to the big picture, like he didn’t remember doing anything of the sort.

"Remember? Like, eighth grade or something, when I told you I was questioning my sexuality, and you were like,” Michael put on his best Jeremy impression, which barely tuning his voice up an octave and awkward body language. “‘Oh nice, as long as you don’t get a crush on me man, I’m cool with it’."

Jeremy winced as the memory floated by his head. Looking back on that now, he cringed. How painfully ironic.

“You see? You’ve been dummy protective of being straight for ages man, so I just didn’t want to embarrass you, especially with the cooler kids there. So I panicked when Rich, y’know, asked that thing.”

Vaguely, Michael might’ve sounded irritated, but Jeremy wrapped it up to hearing things and berated himself.

Speaking of berating, Jeremy suddenly felt very warm, and not a good warmth either. He threw his head away from Michael, maybe offended that Michael made him out to be so shallow, or maybe because he was being arrogant, or maybe because he was just emotional right now.

“What? Michael, I’m bisexual! I just don’t want to be outed yet, and Rich just yelled out that we were dating and I didn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.” Jeremy retorted incredulously.

Oh, shit. No, no, no, no, that did not just happen.

FOUR don’t tell him about your sexuality.

But the bewildered mien on Michael’s face confirmed that yes, that did just happen, and yes, Jeremy will promptly be throwing his head against the refrigerator when he gets home for penance.

Before Jeremy could freak out about how he literally broke one of his only rules surrounding the Michael situation, Michael looked at him with the most intense of looks.

“You’re bi and you didn’t tell me? Your favourite person, your player one, your hopefully closest friend?” Michael asked. He wasn’t mad, thank God, the vein underneath his hair wasn’t protruding right now, but Jeremy, who has gone from freaking out to catatonic shock in the matter of seconds, didn’t really care.

Yeah, he totally wasn’t hyperventilating right now. He resisted the urge to bang his head into the cement wall and instead, curled his legs towards his head and just shrunk.

“Oh, shit! Jeremy!” Michael hushedly yelled, jumping up and sitting on his knees beside besides Jeremy. “I’m not being serious, I’m not mad that you didn’t tell me and God, sorry, I should’ve
realized you didn’t want to talk about it.” he spluttered, because now Jeremy was really freaking out, he’s curled on the floor and everything was a lot more fast now.

Jeremy forgot how to breathe properly, and everything just came through in gasps. Distantly, he could feel Michael’s hands, one was on his back, one was on his thigh, but none of that really mattered. The frenzy was too much for him, and he couldn’t register anything else, everything connected or narrowed down to the fact that he just made a big fucking mistake.

“Jeremy, Jeremy, calm down buddy, I’m right here, not mad at you, everything is fine.” Michael said, and albeit Jeremy was learning how to breathe properly again, he was still rotting in a pit of his own self-loathing, shaking, and rocking, because really, he had one job. "It'll be okay, Jer, it's okay."

No one was supposed to know. He’s the last person I wanted to know.

He was freaking out, and yes, he knew it shouldn’t be such a big deal, but it was. Jeremy’s sexuality is one major clue to the puzzle, and Michael can’t know.

Jeremy was scared of change and Michael can’t know. It would change so much between them, and Michael never changed, he was always in Jeremy’s life, always there and supportive and never different, even when no one else was, even when his own mom wasn’t—

Jeremy was scared, above anything else. He didn’t want to lose Michael, and this, well, this stupid crush could change all that.

In one impulsive sequence of events, Jeremy sat up, and hugged Michael, digging himself deeper into his grave for this one influx of comfort Michael gave.

Jeremy swallowed down his heart, swallowed down his anxiety and relaxed in his arms, cuddling his head into Michael’s shoulder. Michael seemed apprehensive at first, but gave in, and let his arms wrap around Jeremy.

“It’s… fine, Michael. I just, I’m not good with change and— and well, bisexuality is definitely a change for me.” said Jeremy, voice muffled. He was at least breathing again, so that was a plus, it was still a little shaky though.

Michael dry laughed, it wasn’t supposed to be pitiful, but Jeremy took it as such. “I get it, you wanted to stay in the closet. Hell man, it took me like, two years to actually be proud of being gay, even if I wasn’t bullied for it.”

Some stupid, stupid part of Jeremy just happily celebrated Michael confirming himself as gay, ugh. He heard the yes! ring in his ears, and hated it.

But he was grinning, so he obviously didn’t hate it that much, and at least things were slowing down again “Yeah, and I’m still not really… comfortable with it yet, so don’t say anything please.”

“I won’t, Jer.”

Michael’s soft tone affirmed that Jeremy’s panic attack was over. Thank God.

So, well, being bisexual was now open with Michael. Not exactly ideal, but it happened, and he couldn’t reverse it.

Jeremy looked up, still nuzzled on top of Michael’s shoulder, at the clock. After a minute of quizzically staring skywards, he finally figured out the time. One forty-two.
“W- we should probably head out, if we go during the bell then people might get uhm… suspicious.” Jeremy hesitated, because he never made innuendos like that, but he needed some levity here. Thankfully, Michael chuckled.

Jeremy himself didn’t know what to feel, but he smiled too.

It was weird, or at least, it should be. Michael now knew he was bisexual, and as Jeremy was standing up, nothing was different. The world didn’t end, the glint in Michael’s eyes was the same, the bathroom still reeked of pomegranate and fresh linen, and it was okay.

Guess he’ll have to erase number four off that Word document later, but that was the only thing that was different. For now, he had to get himself to class.

So he gathered his backpack, quickly wiping his face again (frankly, it was a surprise that he didn’t cry) for good measure, before he stood up and dumped the tissue away.

Michael did the same, sans the emergency if-you-cry piece of paper towel. As he unlocked the door, he shouldered Jeremy. “Good to know you’re bi though, does this give me permission to flirt with you?”

Jeremy didn’t fight the hot blush, he didn’t fight the renewed euphoric lightness in his chest either, he just chuckled and fondly smacked into Michael’s arm with a playful smile that was a little too wide.

Safe to say that bathroom intervention went better than expected.

The spring in Jeremy’s step followed him through Band, and quieted down a little during his study hall.

It’s fifty minutes of doing almost nothing, so the energy dissipated over Clash Royale and Candy Crush.

That was fine though, he should probably wear down the energy some more, because Michael might find it suspicious for him, Jeremy Heere, renown anxious pessimist, to be so happy suddenly.

So Jeremy stood up, and paced around the atrium’s perimeter. One more thing he could salvage as good from today was that he finally knew what monologue to perform with on Monday for his audition, so he had that pulled up on his phone.

He mouthed the lines during the laps, making sure it was discreet enough so it didn’t look like he was talking to himself.

On the school website, there’d been a list of monologues to choose from, just so students didn’t somehow fuck it up, because you could fuck up picking a monologue, apparently. Probably because Mr Reyes wanted to see certain moods portrayed, but whatever.

Mr Reyes did specify trying dramatic monologues, since it was a dramatic play, so Jeremy chose doing one from Hamlet. Christine helped him pick, since honestly, Jeremy has neither read nor seen Hamlet before.
A sin in Christine’s book, but they laughed it off and she suggested seeing it together whenever it came to town. Jeremy said yes to her, but theatre was really new to him, so he was kind of apprehensive.

Of course, this school play thing was still something that unnerved him to his bones. Everytime Jeremy passed the sign-up sheet, he winced, seeing his own name scrawled on it. Worst was that Jeremy couldn’t scratch it off if he wanted to, Mr Reyes already had him on the roster.

The difficulty is, Jeremy’s had pretty bad anxiety since late middle-school onwards. Generally and socially, so performing in front of other people didn’t come naturally to him. What did come naturally to him was some self-awareness and immediate defiance to any possibly embarrassing situation.

So to help himself, he’s been working on a headspace for acting all week.

He compared it to singing in a car. Jeremy used to do it tons with his mom when he was younger and she was around, and for some reason, it was always so effortless, even on rides to school.

That headspace of ‘I don’t really care, I’m doing this for me’ was what he was going for, because it radiates confidence. That is what Jeremy needed.

In Jeremy’s bedroom, alone, he was a great actor, because he was confident. Michael wasn’t as much as a loser as him because he was confident. Rich was so successful in the Middleborough food-chain because of confidence. Confidence did a lot for someone, obviously.

So that meant that Jeremy just had to fake confidence, because there was no way he could muster up actual confidence in days.

Should be easy enough though, it was just that shock he had to get over; everything about the play was new, and while that was exciting, it was also really fucking scary.

He’d have to ask Christine for some acting tips. She seemed to know what she was doing.

Confidence, some cheesy part of his brain reminded him.

Jeremy’s heart did another flip when he passed by the sign-up sheet for the last time, and he sighed.

Figuring that his energy was low enough after some of that hard deliberation about the school play and his philosophy on stupid headspaces (and alright, maybe the laps around the atrium were kind of exhausting too. His legs were still aching from Gym class, not because he was weak), he resigned to lean on the wall outside the science department and wait for Michael.

They made some plans for tonight, which was nice, because as anxious as Jeremy was, he still loved to get out of his house and away from his dad. So, tonight, Jeremy’s gonna head over to Michael’s, then they’ll take the bus to a local AMC, then back to Michael’s to stay the night.

Frankly, that’s an eventful Friday night. Jeremy couldn’t lie, he was excited, and from the frenzy of text messages buzzing his phone, Michael was too.

Even if the movie they were going to go see has been out for like, three weeks, Michael was pretty hyped up over it. Pretty expected though, because they were going to see some action film, and Michael loved action films.

Jeremy leaned on the wall between locker columns. He was a little anxious, because even if the
movie’s been out for weeks, Jeremy was always paranoid about awkward social interaction, like if the theatre was sold out or something.

Rationally there was no way in hell a movie would be sold out this late in theatres, and if it was, they could just catch another instead, but he was still nervous.

Was it DC or Marvel? Will Michael care if I don’t know the difference?

Plus, okay, maybe that wasn’t the only thing he was nervous about. For some reason, he couldn’t get the stupid word ‘date’ out of his head. He really was trying to crush it and trash the remains, but his thoughts were being stubborn today.

Probably because Michael’s stupid joke earlier about flirting with Jeremy.

Not a date. He reminded himself. Friends, you’re friends, you remember that.

Okay he understood it wasn’t a date, but he wanted it to be. That’s what he was having trouble with, that’s what he’s been having trouble with for a month now, wanting more.

"michael mellon has updated your contact to jeremy queere"

Thanks Michael, really rubbing it in. Jeremy huffed. I’ll get over it.

He tabbed out of his iMessage chat with Michael and scrolled back over to his Hamlet monologue from Act 3, Scene 3. Jeremy wasn’t really the best with dramatizing his words, but scanning over the text, he figured out some syllables to put more emphasis on than others.

“How the fuck do you pronounced Ooph-heel-ee-ah?” mumbled Jeremy, scrolling.

He texted Christine about pronouncing some character’s name, because she talked Shakespeare on the daily, right? She would know how to pronounce it probably better than William Shakespeare himself.

He got halfway through before the bell sounded throughout the halls, and of course, the oblivious idiot Jeremy Heere was, did not realize he was standing right underneath a fucking bell.

That bell caused a headache, and that headache worsened while he and Michael droned onto the streets of New Jersey. That bell was like tinnitus in Jeremy’s traumatized ears, and distracted him as he tried to run through his monologue lines with Michael.

It didn’t help that Michael, despite allegedly not ‘trying’ to, laughed almost every time Jeremy hesitated with a line.

At some point he just decided to stop trying. His headache was limiting and walking and maintaining a conversation didn’t leave that much room for Shakespearean propaganda.

Surprisingly, Jeremy didn’t mind how Michael was laughing at his half-assed performance, and it
should, if it was anyone else then yeah, it definitely would’ve.

But he was with Michael, like best, best friend Michael, like Michael the-boy-you-totally-don’t-have-a-crush-on Mell, and Jeremy didn’t have to be anything except himself with Michael.

He didn’t need to be the best actor, and it was fine to slip-up because at least then he knew where to improve on. Michael still heckled him with compliments either way, so whenever he broke out into laughter, it was okay. Jeremy would gladly make a fool out of himself if he got to see a smile like that.

Gay thoughts aside, they’d have to split up soon anyway, since they didn’t live in the same neighbourhood.

He’d practice his lines at home, so Jeremy shoved his phone in his pocket and just kept walking.

“Hey, why didn’t you sign up for the school play?”

It’s a question that immediately after being popped into Jeremy’s mind, rolled off his tongue. Conversation came easy for the two of them.

Michael shrugged. “I didn’t even know there was a play until after you messaged me about it, but either way, I’d just go on tech. I don’t like acting. Hell man, I was surprised you’re trying it. You’ve always hated theatre, I thought.”

Jeremy has been playing with this lie about how he actually enjoys acting since yesterday. It was funny, because he was acting about how he loves acting, when really, he never even considered doing it until thirty minutes before signing up for a play.

It was also cruel, because Michael was not oblivious. He definitely knew that Jeremy was lying, and he loved to tease him about it. A sort of cat and mouse game between them. Hell, he’s known Jeremy for eleven years, of course he knew that Jeremy actually hates performing.

But fuck, Jeremy wasn’t just about to admit defeat to Michael Mell, probably the snarkiest nerd in the world. So he played with his act.

“I’m surprised too, I mean, it’s always been interesting to me, but like, if you’re a theatre nerd and male? Instantly gay.”

For a second, Jeremy was sure he saw the corners of Michael’s lips frown, before he picked them right back up.

“Mm, yeah, look where that’s gotten you though.” Michael quipped, winking, and ugh, that wink.

Jeremy cannot resist that wink of his. He needed to file a complaint to Congress about how winking should be illegal because it, for some reason, makes his knees weak.

Only when Michael does it, though, what a surprise.

It’s only when they reach the stop-sign to Jeremy’s neighbourhood that he felt a little sad to say goodbye.

This was a recent thing, whenever he left Michael’s house or just a text conversation with him, he started to feel melancholic and lost.

Maybe it was just his crush evolving into the third stage, heartbreak, because everytime Michael
and him had to part ways, there was this unyielding sense of longing in his chest.

Stupid, right? Jeremy knew he’d see him in mere hours, but it was that same, lonely ache in his chest, the same want for more.

Maybe because they never left each other with a kiss, or a warm hug, or a ‘Love you’. It was always ‘See you man!’ and fist-bumps.

Jeremy winced.

“Alright, see you at six then?” Michael asked, and Jeremy, obviously, nodded, knowing better than to let his thoughts bleed out onto his face.

With his leave, Michael prompted his arm out for their regular handshake, and Jeremy hesitated.

Why? Because his dumbass wanted to hold Michael’s hand.

Okay, this headache was really fucking with Jeremy right now, and frankly, he needed about three cups of water and a Tylenol.

He complied with he and Michael’s handshake (no one disrespects their handshake), muttered a “Yeah, see you Micah,” and watched him cross the road, that stupid longing resurfacing in his chest.

Jeremy couldn’t believe himself as he turned onto his street, so he groaned and smacked his forehead, repeating the ‘Stupid, stupid, stupid’ maxim to himself until it was just an empty word rattling around his brain.

If he kept this up then, then well Michael would know in no time.

Their trip to the AMC took thirty minutes, eight stops, and one bus switch before the two arrived, outside under a big, red awning.

But that was fine, because Jeremy (and this was worthy to put under a fucking résumé) actually knew how the transit worked in his hometown. He grew up with it, sure, but it took him like, thirteen years and a million ‘Oh shit, am I on the right bus?’ moments to get confident with it.

That’s more than like, most of his grade could say.

So Jeremy lugged around Michael, directing him what bus they were taking and when they were going to switch, but he’d just non-stop giggle and hug Jeremy.

He was high. Not too high, not ‘I’m on another planet’ high, but high enough that he was twice as emotional and three-hundred times touchier than sober Michael.

Jeremy had the chance to catch a buzz himself, but he figured if Michael was gonna get high, then at least one of them would have to be able to talk coherently and apologise for Michael’s dumb, high, and slightly rude tendencies.

Also, smoking fucking hurts his throat. Sure now, under Michael’s tutelage over the course of a month, he upgraded from shotgunning to being able to smoke straight (seriously, he had to, Jeremy
could hardly function when he and Michael got close like that, plus it never gave him a high), but he still didn’t like the sensation of it.

That being said, he could at least get high sometimes. He actually did it all by himself last week with no coughing, thank you very much. He remembered Michael’s slow clap and genuinely prideful smile, he remembered thinking how silly it was for Michael to be actually proud of him for something so silly like smoking pot, but those thoughts shut up when Michael, emotional because of the pot, hugged him and wouldn’t let go.

*He’s so warm.*

Still today, even through his sweater, his skin radiated a comfortable heat that Jeremy gravitated to.

Okay, Jeremy has to focus on something other than some fuzzy homoromantic memories from a week ago. He was in the box office line at the AMC, with Michael happily listening to music through his earbuds beside him, and there was some slight twinge of anxiety nestled in his stomach right now because well, he’ll have to talk to some employee for tickets soon.

“Jer,” Michael said, noticing the fidgeting between Jeremy’s thumbs and placing his own hand on his shoulder. “I can talk, it’s chill.”

Jeremy was, of course, worried that Michael might be a little too high to talk to movie theatre staff, but Michael’s comment seemed more of a statement rather than suggestion, so he didn’t protest.

Either way, they’re teenagers being paid minimum wage, Jeremy was pretty sure they weren’t gonna willfully cause more trouble in their day because they have reason to believe some kid might’ve had contact with semi-legal substances.

Michael was fine when he spoke to the employee, and the best part of the deal was that Jeremy didn’t have to talk to anyone, he just snatched the tickets, gave him some cash (courtesy of Mr Heere), and lead Michael away to the concession stands.

“See? I’m not like, that high.” Michael claimed, though Jeremy was pretty sure the grin on his face has been there since they got on the bus half an hour ago.

“Mhm.” Jeremy murmured, the smile on his own face was smaller, but fond and genuine. “You paying for popcorn or am I?”

“You legit just bought my ticket, I’ll pay for your popcorn jackass.” Michael grabbed his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans. It was brown, and it looked like he’s been picking at one of the corners, trying to peel off the leather.

“What a gentleman,” Jeremy scoffed, and Michael, the bastard he is, winked. “You know it, m’lady.”

To Jeremy’s relief—as he and Michael shuffled in through the entrance tunnel to see—the theatre was not only not sold out, but it was linearly populated with screen-lit shadows.

Okay, sure, that was to be expected from a film that has been out for coming up on four weeks, but Jeremy was always paranoid about these type of things. That was nothing new. He’s never seen a sold-out theatre, but he could imagine how awkward it’d be if you couldn’t find any seat.

Either way, picking their seats wasn’t difficult for them. Michael loved sitting on the top row, and Jeremy was always more of middle guy, so they compromised and sat in one of the upper rows almost every time they went to the cinema together.
They basically reserved almost the exact same seats every time they went. Third row from the back and a little to the left because Michael’s right eye had better vision, even through his glasses.

Through the previews, like normal, Jeremy and Michael destroyed their respective frozen yogurts, and probably ate half their popcorn before the film even started.

So a pretty typical movie date night so far.

Like respectable members of society, Michael and Jeremy hardly talk during films. For Michael, it was hard not to, because of holy shit, did you see that? moments and just a naturally talkative personality. Taratitat was what his mum called him; talkative.

Oh, also Michael was the biggest nerd on conspiracy theories and plot development, and he got so excited watching movies. Seeing a story unravel off a screen just touched a simple, fervid, primal hankering in Michael to predict the endgame or what was going to happen, and of course he wanted to talk about it, just in case he’s ever right, because then he’d be able to gloat about being a fortune-teller later.

Now, he’s learned to shut up during films, constricting his chatter to a couple of jokes and a ‘Do you need a refill?’ per movie night.

Why? Well, it used to annoy the hell out of Jeremy when they were middle-schoolers. Seven years together and one night of Avengers: Age of Ultron later, Jeremy Heere walked out of this same AMC four years ago, grumpy and disappointed because Michael quote ‘ruined the movie for him’, because yes, he’d totally predicted the ending, and distracted Jeremy during most of the action sequences. That day forward, Michael never wanted to see Jeremy’s sad pout (in the back of a shitty movie theatre parking lot on a rainy night no less) ever again, and vowed to keep his mouth shut.

Still, Jeremy couldn’t say he liked the quiet Michael Mell sitting next to him.

Of course, it’s Michael Mell, the nerd who skipped school for Call of Duty championships, and Jeremy happened to be the biggest ‘straight’ loser with a crush on that nerd, so yeah, he does like Michael regardless if he was quiet or not. The point was that Jeremy still preferred it when Michael rambled on about the intricacies of Yu-Gi-Oh! or some bullshit Buzzfeed article he recently read.

But the boy looked completely immersed in the film, and to his right, Jeremy simply wasn’t.

Okay, Jeremy loved the movies. He loved getting entangled in some narrative, escaping reality, sharing a room with tens of quiet strangers, he loved the concession food, the arcade out front, and yes, even the conspiracies from Michael from time to time, but today was different.

Today Jeremy just couldn’t enjoy it.

Today Jeremy felt uncomfortable, maybe even vulnerable, sitting in the small, near-empty theatre.

Today his head wouldn’t stop thinking, and wondering, and buzzing, and he just couldn’t get immersed in the film.

Today he just sat there, alone, in a quiet theatre with tens of quiet strangers, with a half-eaten bag
of popcorn on his lap, with Michael, unnervingly silent to his left, and something was missing.

It’s not a date, and Jeremy knew that full and well. He didn’t try to fight the notion, he just tried not to tarry on the disappointment, he just tried not to look to his left.

He laid his eyes on the wide screen and wouldn’t let them budge anywhere else. Seeing the characters move on screen, hearing them balk and pity the kid in some random AMC who couldn’t focus on a fucking movie because of his anxiety.

Jeremy hardly registered that there was a film there, in front of him, that he was supposed to be watching in front of him, he didn’t recognize that they were in a cinema, he didn’t realize that it was Friday or know if the weather outside was humid or dry.

He only knew about the hole inside, the longing, this thirst for something. Some thirst he could never quench, because it wanted something he could only pacify in fantasies, something that really only Michael could give him.

So maybe in some passive train of thought, Jeremy didn’t know what he was doing right now. Awareness just slipped out of his mind, apparently, and Jeremy wasn’t conscious of him in the theatre, of having popcorn to eat, of the ring of laughter from some joke on screen, of that foreign warmth in his hand.

Until he snapped his head down, until he saw his hand curling around Michael’s wrist, like a train headed full speed on a track that a woman, miles ahead, was tied down to.

Jeremy was that woman and Jeremy was the train conductor, hoping and trying to stop the train from hitting this poor woman on the tracks, but everyone knew how long it takes for a train to slow down. He’s doomed.

So he just watched it, from the corner of his eye. He watched his hand snake around Michael’s wrist tensely, still praying that, if there was a God, that his hand would get the message, that it would quit and leave Michael alone.

Jeremy choked, and threw his attention onto the screen when his paranoid self heard Michael crack his neck. Was he aware about the hands? Why hadn’t he moved yet?

Despite Jeremy’s panicked brain trying to regain some control of his amok hand, it found refuge cupped in Michael’s hand.

And Michael didn’t move flinch, he didn’t move away, he didn’t look at Jeremy skeptically, and he didn’t immediately ask what the fuck.

Not a date, not a date, not a date. Don’t think that it means more than it does.

Jeremy breathed in sharply. Smelled a lot mustier now, but maybe that was just because of the recent addition of his sweat into the theatre’s air.

Michael’s fingers interlocked Jeremy’s, and that warmth in Jeremy’s palm became scalding hot. He’s lucky to be in a dark theatre, because this small gesture feels so intimate and non-platonic that his face was too pink for Michael’s eyes.

Jeremy gulped. They weren’t even watching a horror film, it was Marvel. Plastered on the screen was anything but scary, so there wasn’t any reason for Jeremy to want comfort right now— but maybe that’s what was so intimate about it.
Their hands kept still, interlocked loosely before the cupholder, neither making note of it outside their heads.

And Jeremy so wished he had telepathy right now, just some ability to know what someone else was feeling or thinking, like that Mantis girl on the screen. He so desperately wanted to know if Michael was freaking out as much as Jeremy was—

No, he wasn’t, or probably not, Jeremy can’t be too sure, but he still was looking wide-eyed at the screen with a completely inscrutable demeanor.

In juxtaposition, Jeremy’s breath was hitched in his throat for the first time in days, and a fuzzy euphoria whimmed his heart.

His body was frozen, but he didn’t care, his hand froze in just the right spot. He’s delirious, but if this was all a dream, then it’s one of the best ones Jeremy’s ever had.

Maybe it was just the euphoria that let Jeremy finally dream, but he started lingering onto strings of wishful thinking.

Like how if this was some fairytale, then Jeremy would tap Michael’s shoulder and spill his heart right here, not giving two damns about whether or not someone else could hear him or if he was interrupting their film.

In this dumb fairytale, Michael would feel the same way. He’d take Jeremy onto his own seat, onto his lap, and kiss his brains out until the house lights came on.

_TWO_ try to catch yourself from thinking about him un-platonically.

But it wasn’t some silly fairytale, this was real life, and Jeremy couldn’t spill his heart out, nor should he even think about it.

Because Michael wouldn’t accept him, and that’s a fact. He wouldn’t feel the same way, Michael wouldn’t sweetly murmur into his ear _not_ spoilers for the film, but some loving obscenities about what they’d do when they got home.

So Jeremy didn’t move, he grounded himself to reality and walled off that lovestruck wistfulness. Because _get a grip, Heere._

On some needy caprice, he curled his hand farther into Michael’s, and leaned deeper in his seat, ignoring the burn in his hand, denying that the burn that wouldn’t stop spreading up his arm, and definitely not still thinking about that silly little fantasy.

Maybe Jeremy was just naïve, naïve to sometimes let delusions slip into his head, naïve enough to feel light and dizzy and hopeful just because Michael held his hand, naïve to have a crush on him in the first place.

If that was the case then fine, naïveté felt great tonight. It wasn’t like Jeremy could do anything else anyways, he’s kind of stuck with a crush on Michael Mell, so it was natural to feel things and think things and want things that he’ll hate himself for later.

Friday night, and Jeremy felt on top of the world just leaving the cinema.
Visiting the public restroom for that sweet, post-movie piss? Great, amazing, nice, and he also made sure to blot down his slightly oily face with some paper towel and scruff up his hair on the way out.

It wasn’t a date, and Jeremy accepted that. He counted tonight as a win for his little bisexual heart and passed out beside Michael hours later.

He was fine, this was okay. He'll get over it soon.

Chapter End Notes

12k words!! holy shit!!

as always thank you for support on this fic!! im so hungry so bye
hello! before you start reading, i have to warn you that there is a nsfw scene late into this chapter. it is there for plot development and if you are sensitive or in any disagreement to that content, especially knowing that the character is underage, then i would recommend not reading that specific scene.

i will include notes at the end of the chapter summarizing the scene/why the scene is included if you chose to skip the scene.

Remember, this content may be inappropriate for some audiences.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Turns out, as luck would have it, he would not be over this soon.

“Ugh, Jeremy, what the fuck,” Michael groaned from the underbelly of his blankets.

It was Saturday morning, probably somewhere around eight o’clock, and there, sitting in a bed that wasn’t his in a random suburb of New Jersey, some Jeremy was already awake.

Checking his phone, messaging his dad or eyeing down a WikiHow blog, blankets pooling around his waist and a surly Mell half-sleeping beside him.

The two always slept like this, in the same bed— or well, at least at Michael’s house they did. His bedroom was littered with novelties, trinkets, trophies, clothes, furnished with large desks and electronics he didn’t need, and was simply too small to fit another mattress. Plus Michael already had a pretty big bed (a Queen-sized), and unlike Jeremy’s twin bed, being close was never really an issue here.

That’s what they blamed it on. Sleeping in the same bed meant being too close. That’s why it was okay to sleep in Michael’s bed, and not Jeremy’s.

Still the two almost always ended up entangled together one way or the other and frankly, and sometimes it happened at Jeremy’s house too, despite their rule.

Even when Jeremy was sitting up, Michael’s ankles were enmeshed with his own under the covers; and when he’d been laying down, Michael’s (artfully crafted, in Jeremy’s opinion) face was snuggled right into his shoulder.

A great site and feeling (seriously, it should be in an art museum or have its own Wikipedia page, at least) to wake up to in the morning. He got to see it often, too, because Michael shared his affinity for platonic cuddles.

Cuddling just made Jeremy feel warm, and safe, and cared about, and wanted, and it was so comfortable.
Except when he was half-hard, which he was, right now. Morning wood was a curse, and Michael’s tired voice shouldn’t sound *that* fucking sinful, but it does anyway.

It’s hoarse and rough and doesn’t really sound too much like the geek that complained about bugs in the *Destiny* games or who had a not-so secret affinity for *Dungeons & Dragons*, but holy shit, it was kind of hot.

But it still sounded like Michael, and it was Michael, and Michael was Jeremy’s best friend.

Trying to remind himself of that was more difficult than it should’ve been, but he warded away the awry lust. Kind of hard to do, but he managed. He hasn’t broken number three and he won’t break number three, no matter how hot Michael objectively was.

Anyway, Jeremy naturally woke up pretty early (he conditioned himself to wake up for school himself after his dad had basically given up on fathering him), and Michael hated it.

He never meant to on weekends, and typically had no trouble falling back asleep, but this morning, for minutes after he woke up, Jeremy laid down and just quietly watched over him, like as if Michael was some sort of shepherd showing him the path to everlasting life.

Through the shudders, the room had been coloured pale and yellow-toned, and all through the morning thin rectangles of light drew across Michael’s shut eyes and furrowed brow.

He was half-awake now, and apparently pretty grumpy that Jeremy was up.

So he put his phone away, the blankets pulling on his waist as he leaned over to set it back on the bedside table.

That’s when Michael’s arm reached up and wrung around Jeremy’s pale shoulder, his other curling around the boy’s bare waist.

“So early, Jer, come back to bed.” sleepily murmured Michael, trying to pull Jeremy back down into the depths of the blankets lazily.

Jeremy squeaked, Michael’s hands were warmer than the bed and one of them was a little too close to his hips.

So yeah, of course, he was dying. Predictable, right? He could feel his face shooting up in temperature and his chest inflaming.

“You know you can sleep here on your own, right?” Jeremy retorted, scoffing. He didn’t know how or what deal with the devil he had to make, but Michael looked handsome even with a face topped with bad bedhead.

“Yeeeeeah, I know, but you’re like,” Michael muttered, and he clawed at Jeremy’s formerly-cold waist a little tighter. His stomach flipped, Michael’s gravelly and deep morning voice also sounded affectionate, sweet, and protective. “the perfect cuddlebuddy, Miah, c’mere.”

Jeremy melted, so when Michael tugged again, he helplessly sunk into the blankets and fell beside Michael.

“Yay.” Michael happily murmured, his lower hand rubbing up and down Jeremy’s back. Shocks, frenzies of shocks, kissed the skin where Michael’s hand had left, like a phantom.

Intoxicating, really. “Sleeptime.” Michael purred, nestling his head into Jeremy’s shoulder. His
spine, at first, shot straight up with the contact, but he tried to loosen his joints and relax.


_Fucking Michael and his stupid being cute and hot and stupid, ugh._

Had Jeremy died and gone to heaven? He was sure this is what it’d feel like, and if he wasn’t dead
yet he was sure the way Michael was lazily dragging his hand across Jeremy’s back, and how his
warm breath glazed over Jeremy’s chest, would be the end of him.

Well, he couldn’t think of a better way to die. He rolled off the tension in his ramrod shoulders,
knowing that even a lethargic Michael would probably ask about it soon, and snuggled his head
deeper into his pillow, admittedly kind of tired too.

Still, even if he wasn’t right now, he’d try to force himself to sleep, because this position was
simply too good, too comfortable, and too safe to stay awake for.

Jeremy didn’t know what time it was when he next woke up, Jeremy didn’t know if it was day, or
night, or some twilight in between, Jeremy didn’t know if Earth was still spinning, or if his planet
had been attacked by martians or not.

Jeremy knew was how fucking close he and Michael were, and that’s all he knew.

And it took him a second to realize it, too. But after some tight shimmying, a couple of seconds
dedicated to his brain slowly regaining consciousness and later, after finally being aware that his
bleary eyes were looking at an almost exclusively tan image, his mouth just dropped open.

Because he— he was almost on _top_ of Michael. Okay, it’s true, they were huge fucking guilty
cuddlers, but they still typically had boundaries.

He wasn’t sure how their unconscious bodies mangled themselves into this position, but here he
was, with one leg hooked over both of Michael’s, with Jeremy’s chest on top of his, and with one
arm reaching out towards the farther of the boy’s two shoulders.

His head was tucked in between Michael’s chest and shoulder, eyes staring at his collarbone and,
more distantly, his grey pillows, and Jeremy couldn’t help but freeze up.

Was Michael still asleep? Jeremy assumed he was, since it seemed like, from what he could tell,
Michael’s head was rolled back into the pillow behind him.

Plus Michael, if he saw them in this position, would probably peel himself away or wiggle onto the
far side of the bed to avoid any awkward interaction about it later.

Which is something Jeremy should be doing, but didn’t want to.

Of course he didn’t want to, he felt like he was about to have a heart attack in the best way
possible. It shouldn’t be legal to feel so safe yet so in danger.

Michael’s jaw brushed against Jeremy’s forehead lazily, and his breath hitched in panic. By the
way his chest was rising and falling (and yes, Jeremy knew the pattern very well with his chest
being so close to his), he was still asleep.
They were slow, deep breaths; Jeremy mimicked them and closed his eyes.

Something about this was just so… perfect. Calm, soothing, serene, zen, call it whatever you wanted, but Jeremy just felt relaxed.

He could be hurling a million miles an hour into the Sun, he could be on his way to the guillotine, he could be getting abducted by aliens right now, but it was fine. Jeremy was okay.

Jeremy was okay.

Jeremy was never okay. So why was he now? He woke up each and every morning trying to swallow down a fistful of anxiety, but he never had to when he was here, with Michael.

The realization dawned on him like one of the light rectangles, bright, holy, like an angelic choir was in full swing in his head.

It dawned on him smoothly. It dawned on him smoothly. He didn’t have the urge to run away, he didn’t need to roll off Michael or hyperventilate, he didn’t bother to try and fight it like he usually would’ve.

Because it was fine. It was fine. He didn’t know why but it was so, so fine.

Michael.

Jeremy was so fucking happy to finally realize it, to finally fucking understand, to not be in denial anymore, and to admit it.

I love you.

He gingerly let his left hand dance up Michael’s right, ghosting his skin with soft strokes, mapping his musculature, until he came to his shoulder.

Jeremy slightly tilted his head a little skywards, just so he could stay and watch in some awe at how his fingertips pranced and bent between the faint lines embedded in Michael’s skin.

It was so stupid, being so blind before. Keeling over and blushing like an embarrassed little kid because he just thought it was some silly crush.

Some stupid infatuation that would die off.

But he knew Michael, he knew almost everything there was to know about him inside and out. They’ve known each other eleven years and a few months, and were comfortable sleeping in the same bed, sharing toothbrushes (even if it was kind of gross), playing retro video-games, avoiding popular kids and gossiping like they were newspaper tabloids together.

It wasn’t some dumb puppy-love that some lonely girl would have for the football captain. It wasn’t some look-from-afar obsession.

He curled his left hand around the bend between Michael’s neck and shoulder, making sure to keep his touch light and feathery so he wouldn’t wake him.

It’s you, and of course it is. When has it never not been?

He let his other hand slide around Michael’s neck too, resting it there, and dug his face back into his bare chest, into some dip in his collarbone, and let himself just lay down and relax.
I love you so fucking much Michael.

It still hurt to think about, don’t get him wrong. Thinking it felt like having no shoes and walking on a dry and gravelly road on a hot summer’s day.

The pavement hurt his feet, it made him sore, and there were times where he felt like giving up, but he kept going. He was walking somewhere, and he’d only stop when the Sun beat him down to death, or when he finally got to where he was headed.

He wished he didn’t love Michael, it’s true. Jeremy didn’t want to love him, but he so fucking did, and he loved that he did.

Jeremy’s love was bittersweet. It was like Beauty and the Beast, maybe, because he knew he was captive, he knew he wasn’t allowed to leave, but he fell in love with that stupid beast anyway, found him charming, wanted more.

As much as he hated it too, he really fucking loved that he was in love with Michael.

And there was nothing he could do about it anyway. It was the dry, unadulterated truth, something he’d cackle about years later. He mind as well bask in it now, feel the whims and turns and waves, ride the rollercoaster and let it take him blindly to wherever.

That was fine. Being in love with your best friend for eleven years? That was fine, honestly.

Jeremy apparently had some messed up case of Stockholm Syndrome, but that was fine too, at least right now it was.

His eyes grazed down to Michael’s skin— tan, and golden, and soft. Michael’s hair? Dark, wavy, and rebellious. He wished he could see Michael’s eyes right now, but they were shut.

He hummed into Michael’s solid chest. His heart was beating loud and proud against Michael’s slow, sleep-induced thrums, but Jeremy didn’t care. He was lovestruck, and it was okay to be.

Jeremy, fifteen time winner of the Worrier Of The Year award and star of the Anxious Peoples catalogue, was actually not worried about how he’d deal with these feelings.

That’s how he knew they were there. With Michael, he didn’t have to worry about these things.

But he wouldn’t ever settle for anything less than a friendship with Michael, and Michael would probably say the same. An eleven year bromance basically binds two people together no matter the circumstances, so Jeremy wasn’t worried about exposing himself right now. Michael would never find out.

Michael was asleep right now anyways, so it didn’t matter that Jeremy’s suspiciously beaming smile went up to his eyes, not that he could stop if he tried.

Sure, it’s a sad reality, knowing you’ll never get to confess your love to someone, but it’s one that Jeremy could deal with right now. Maybe he was crying, maybe he wasn’t, he didn’t really know himself.

He loved Michael, and that felt so good to finally be okay with.

And maybe he wasn’t okay with it. Maybe he’d hate himself later and maybe he’d try to cover it all up with excuses.
But he couldn’t deny truth anymore. He didn’t have to be proud of it, hell, he could hardly admit he was bisexual out loud.

Michael was a lot of things; he was that nerd who stayed up to four in the morning speed running the Halo campaign, he was that guy you called when your computer broke down, he was the Sun, and the Moon, and Jeremy’s second emergency contact, and he was so fucking caring all the time.

Michael was also shaking himself awake. The evidence to prove this was:

a) Michael’s breathing was picking up. It wasn’t slow, long breaths anymore.

b) He was twitching. In his leg, which was curled snugly underneath Jeremy’s, and in his fingers.

c) Mumbling. Michael does a lot of it when he wakes up, because for some reason, his first human impulse when he regains consciousness is to talk.

Jeremy, of course, started freaking out, because he was very aware of every area of contact and how awkward their positioning was, and soon Michael would too, so he kind of feared any interaction with him right now.

Those calmed nerves were a thing of the past, now frayed and wiry, but he didn’t let himself go ramrod straight or twitch. He kept his body limp, even if he couldn’t deny his incredibly hot cheeks.

“J– Jeremy?” Michael groggily said, but Jeremy didn’t respond, his head slunk like a ragdoll against Michael’s skin. Pretend sleep was his first priority right now, so he hoped Michael wouldn’t notice how tense Jeremy’s muscles were.

Yeah, okay, maybe he was making this out to be more of a stealth mission than it actually was. This wasn’t Mission Impossible, and he didn’t really have anything to hide. He wasn’t conducting some secret lab experiments or devising some plan to overthrow the government, he just didn’t want things to be awkward right now.

He wanted to stay here, where he felt safe and cared for and loved, and even if it was all by mistake, even if he had to use some pretence that he was asleep, even if this wasn’t real, then that’s okay. Jeremy just wanted to live in this for now.

There was a long pause, and Jeremy felt Michael’s head lean forwards, but he didn’t try to wiggle out of their entanglement, he didn’t roll Jeremy off him and he didn’t shriek.

He readjusted a pillow so his head was more supported and held higher, and just apparently comfortably sat in the silence. He didn’t bother reaching for his phone (though, in this position, Jeremy couldn’t see how he could), he didn’t hum a song or tap his feet against the bed.

No, he didn’t do any of that. After a while passed (admittedly Jeremy didn’t exactly know what a ‘while’ was. He didn’t really have a good concept of time when he was just laying in anticipation, eyes shut tight and hardly breathing), Jeremy just thought he passed out again.

But then Jeremy felt Michael’s hand in his hair. Trolling through his bedhead and massaging his scalp with his weaving fingers— Jeremy couldn’t stop himself from letting out a contented little sigh.

Maybe, in the corners of his mind, he feared that Michael was going to yank his hair to wake him up, call Jeremy some homophobic slur for how his unconscious ended up so enmeshed with his, but he just didn’t.
Of course he didn’t, this was Michael. It wouldn’t make sense, he wasn’t rude, he didn’t use homophobic slurs, hell, for what Jeremy understood he was gay.

Just in that moment, anything was possible, but as Michael’s fingers continued to rake through his strands, he calmed down again.

He relaxed a little more into Michael’s hard chest, while also at the same time, freaking out.

Because he loved it when Michael played with his hair, it drove him wild. Jeremy hoped his soft noises of delight didn’t give him away— did asleep people make these noises?

“I should wake him up soon,” Michael mumbled. It wasn’t too intelligible, since he was just murmuring to himself, but Jeremy could decipher it. “A jowa. I can’t believe he said that.”

Jeremy never said that. Wasn’t that what Michael’s uncle-or-something said? Better question, wasn’t that like, an entire month ago? Why was Michael fixated on it?

Jowl-ah. he noted, even though there was no way in hell he’d remember to Google it later, he didn’t even know how to spell it right.

Michael’s hair drove smoothly through a knot, but it still hurt. Jeremy didn’t flinch, he just inhaled sharply and hoped it was soundless enough that he didn't notice.

Jeremy wondered what Michael thought of their situation right now. Their bodies were closer than they were supposed to be, and Jeremy was almost completely, minus one of his legs, on top of him right now, basically hugging him in some very close-knit embrace.

He also wondered how heavy he was, and how uncomfortable it was for Michael, but those were mostly thoughts stowed at the back of his head.

Jeremy was pretty much a twig, but he couldn’t imagine that having a hundred and twenty— thirty, maybe— something pounds sprawled across his body was pleasant.

Still, and Jeremy was confused by it, Michael didn’t move. He was still tugging slowly at knots in his hair— which still, feels too intimate, but Jeremy loves it—, brushing awry curls from his forehead, and somehow not minding that they were hardly inches apart. Jeremy could feel Michael’s breathing shallowly on the right corner of his forehead.

Jeremy didn’t really know how much longer he could play with this act. Being so close to Michael had started a ticking timebomb nestled in his ribcage, and the timer was ticking a little too quickly towards literal combustion.

He didn’t know what literal combustion meant, but to be fair, he did feel like he was about to explode, so maybe it was literal literal combustion.

Michael eventually lifted his hand off Jeremy’s head, apparently satisfied. He felt Michael’s head roll back from the stretching tendons in his neck, and a heavenly sigh part from his lips.

Okay yeah, that went straight to Jeremy’s dick, okay, holy shit. “What am I gonna do with you, Jer,” he muttered, in that husky morning voice of his, and that’s not helping Jeremy’s case either.

Jeremy shuffled slightly and readjusted himself so his crotch jutted out to the side, towards his blankets. He wondered if Michael knew he was awake, but after a long stretch of quiet, he felt Michael’s fingers tap his forehead.
“Hey,” Michael prodded, and Jeremy fluttered his eyes awake. It’s been so long since the last time he opened them that the light from the window was especially blinding, not that he could see much of it anyway.

He looked up. “M– Micah?” murmured Jeremy, trying to make himself seem lethargic as possible. His eyelids were hazy and heavily lidded, his movements slow, and his breaths easy and heavy.

His heartbeat was still more fast than he wanted it to be, but he didn’t know if Michael could feel it. He probably could, with how their chests were basically connected— which was only making his heartbeat faster and louder; ironic.

“It’s like, one o’clock, do you wanna get up soon?” Michael inquired, his voice quieter than usual, probably so he wouldn’t hurt Jeremy’s ears.

No, I really don’t.

Maybe he was trying to be sarcastic, but his voice sounded too tender and genuine. Jeremy furrowed his brow and pouted. “Five more minutes? I’m cozy.”

Okay, maybe originally Jeremy was just doing this to play with his oblivious act (an Academy Awards winning performance) that he was just asleep, but now he was just being honest. He really liked it here.

Either way, it worked. Michael conceded and laid his head back down. “Mmkay, I’m not complaining.”

He felt Michael’s arm curl a little more comfortably around his waist. He tried not to scream.

Jeremy wanted to ask him to stay like this forever, but realistically, he knew that was futile, childish, and so, so not-okay.

So even if he wanted more, he didn’t say anything, he just relaxed into Michael’s collar and basked in the five minutes.

Save it for the journal.

Jeremy left Michael’s house around two. He showered there after getting a text from his dad that there was no more hot water for the day, dressed, he had some cereal, and said goodbye.

Getting off Michael was the hardest part of his day. A statement that frankly sounds like an innuendo (and definitely made Jeremy flustered when he thought about it walking home) but that’s not the point.

Michael was cozy, and warm, and safe, and loving, and Jeremy definitely stayed there longer than five minutes, until the awkward air from Michael’s concentrated silence started getting to him.

Jeremy, all things considered, has been dealing with the whole ‘Oh shit, this isn’t just a crush I’m actually fucking in love with you’ epiphany pretty well since this morning.

Of course, he’s already schooled himself for an entire month in How Not To Fuck Up A Friendship 101, so Michael probably hadn’t noticed anything different, but Jeremy? Well, Jeremy was fine...
too, somehow.

Things seemed abnormally normal, even after he left Michael’s house. Jeremy’s world was supposed to be flipped upside down, it should be on fire, or something—something should be different, but he just felt happier. That was the only change.

He figured that maybe he’s loved Michael for a long time, that maybe he just didn’t realize it before, but that sounded cheesy and sappy, so he kept it to himself.

Not that he wasn’t gonna keep it to himself already, nobody (and Jeremy means nobody) can know about it. Not his dad, not Rich, not Christine or Jake or Chloe or Brooke or Jenna, and especially not Michael.

Anyways, Jeremy had too many trains of thoughts and opinions fighting for dominance on the subject that he just decided to ignore it entirely. Anxious or not, he was definitely in love with Michael, and there was no use wasting time with a headache over whether or not that was good or bad.

He didn’t know what it meant, alright? He didn’t know if it would change anything, and he didn’t know whether or not to be terrified of it. Right now Jeremy was still on a lazy high from this morning, because of stupid Michael and his stupid I’m warm like the Sun skin and adorable cuddles and fuck.

Jeremy was flipping through his journal now, occasionally brushing his hand through his damp hair, sometimes bringing his own fingers back to linger on the shampoo scent, because it was different than what he usually washes with and therefore interesting. Plus, it smells like Michael.

Okay, he sort of liked how it smelled like Michael. Something about it was comforting, especially when somehow, the journal he was writing in switched with his old scrapbook. It made him feel like Michael was here, with him, going through the album too.

Jeremy had some more photos saved on his phone of the two of them that he’d definitely love to put in the blank sheets, but knowing how stupid and useless buying that bullshit glossy picture paper would be (plus coloured ink, he was pretty sure his dad only printed in black and white), he’d probably never get around to doing it.

The photos on the pages though, they were nice memories too. Of course, Jeremy didn’t remember all the moments that they captured, since most of them were from a pre-middle school era when Jeremy’s mom adopted a sudden love for photography and went ballistic on her Nikon, but Jeremy still could recall a lot of them.

The majority were at school events like a sports game or talent show, but there were some compiled at the mall, the cinema, different parks, outside Michael’s optometrist office (when and why did Jeremy go to one of his appointments with him?), or the annual fall fair.

Michael’s face changed a lot, but Jeremy could probably say the same. From one photo fresh out of a track and field competition, eleven year old Jeremy Heere looked like he had more meat on his bones to a skinnyfat level, and his face wasn’t nearly as angular and defined (Jeremy took that as a win that he looked more sculpted than a eleven year old version of himself, but that sounded pathetic out loud).

Also, apparently Michael used to have the absolute worst sense of fashion, which Jeremy didn’t remember until now.
Seriously, in that photo he’s wearing neon orange *Nike* basketball shorts and an ugly, subdued green *Bass Pro Shops* shirt, along with a silver bracelet (silver didn’t do Michael’s tan skin justice. Gold did). Maybe it was just the sportiest, lightest outfit he could find? He couldn’t imagine it getting past Mrs Mell though.

On top of that, they’re sweaty children, and even though yeah, Jeremy had been super-duper proud of himself for getting second place in one of the events (Michael’s best placement was a fourth, but he wasn’t bummed out about it), it’s still gross.

But hilarious, too, so he plucked the photo out of the laminated cover, grabbed his phone, and sent the picture Michael’s way.

Jeremy noted that his— Michael’s, but Jeremy’s also applied since holy shit what is that on his head— hair looked so much better now than the awkward, extremely short cuts his mom used to love on him. She actually only allowed him to grow it out more around eighth grade because Michael complained enough about how it didn’t fit his face.

Jeremy chuckled, Michael was kind of a momma’s boy. If he ever became a biker, then he’d probably get one of those mom tattoos with a heart on his shoulder. Mrs Mell— Jeremy still didn’t know her maiden name— was strict, but probably the most loving mother on the planet.

There’s some other kids behind them in the picture, but Jeremy hardly recognized them. He was pretty sure one of them was that same Ollie from Gym class (the homophobic jackass), but only vaguely. The kid looks like a ten year old crack addict in the photo.

Okay he kind of still looked like a crack addict now, but like, a semi-attractive one who is going to rehab and trying to get their shit together. Realistically Ollie probably didn’t do crack, but maybe weed. Jeremy pegged him as the angsty ‘*I post deep rap lyrics on my Snapchat story at four in the morning*’ stoner type.

Nothing like the Michael stoner type, which, to Jeremy, was the best stoner type. For one, when high, he was actually tolerable. He was just giggly, and really touchy, and could get really emotional really quickly.

He was the starstruck stoner, the stoner that philosophized only when high, the stoner that find the most mundane task somehow fascinating, the stoner that loved documentaries and staring at the ceiling.

Sure, probably a lot of pot-smokers were like that, but Michael was special.

That was, admittedly, for other reasons though.

Jeremy cleared his throat and closed his scrapbook.

Sometimes, it made him emotional, sometimes it served as a quick pick-me-up to see how he’s evolved, sometimes it made him sad, because he hated looking at his childhood because he was so much happier then, but he didn’t really remember why he got it out today.

But he was still giggling from that picture of Ollie at ten years old, with eyebags that read he hadn’t slept in weeks, so he guessed it worked as a pick-me-up today.

His phone buzzed from underneath one of his thighs— how’d it get there? — and Jeremy almost fell off his bed adjusting his leg.

Jeremy Heere, klutz of the year.
It’s that same Saturday night when Jeremy broke that one rule he said he’d never break.

The hours to it passed by pretty smoothly. Jeremy’s interest went in between texting to journal-entry-writing to playing ranked games of *Overwatch*, and time seemed to go faster than usual.

One moment it was four thirty-two, then four fifty-six, five fourteen, et cetera. Minutes didn’t really feel like minutes.

Either way, Jeremy was grateful. He didn’t have anything else to do, and weekends for him typically got boring quickly, so keeping his mind preoccupied was nice for a change.

So around seven thirty, Jeremy had supper (he cooked up eggs and french fries for himself), and around ten twelve he conceded to bed, shutting off his computer and stuffing his journal back under his bed before retreating to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Jeremy yawned at himself in the mirror— honestly, he wasn’t sleepy yet, but his back was sore (he assumed from hunching over, as his bullies loved to remind him he did that), and he craved that sweet relief he’d get when he finally laid down.

So he brushed his teeth quickly, used the restroom, undressed, smeared his face with that weird drugstore night cream that was supposed to make his acne go away, and left for his bedroom.

Jeremy’s limbs were heavy and exhausted, but his eyes weren’t nearly enough to merit sleep. He turned off his lights, collapsed onto his bed, crawled into the covers and grabbed his phone from underneath his pillow, where he’d thrown it.

With everything that has happened, his bedroom kind of turned into some asylum for Jeremy to take refuge in.

A safe camp to sit in and realize that yeah, it’s really hard to ignore his feelings (especially for Michael), but he survived another day, and would survive the next.

Loneliness felt good sometimes. It was refreshing just to take a big step back and look at the picture, to remind himself that he’s okay, that the play won’t even be a big deal, that the popular kids actually said they liked him, and that things with Michael are fine right now.

But really, as much as slipping into bed at the end of the day filled him with satisfaction, somethings just felt better.

So Jeremy wasn’t even thinking about his problems right now. His mind went blank with relief, his back pain dissipating after his long day, and he relished in the tingly sensation of his tight knots unwinding into his mattress.

His cracked his back with a grunt, but he sighed delightedly into his pillow as he just laid back, and melted.

Sure, Michael’s bed and Michael himself were both very warm and heartening, but this room, this was his, and no one else’s.

There was something comforting about that— and maybe at some other time, Jeremy would
wonder why that was— but tonight, he summed it up to some primitive, proprietorial instinct and didn’t think twice about it.

He then proceeded to drown himself in his sheets, spreading his prostrate legs, sliding them against every cold spot on the underbelly of his covers, stretching his arms out underneath the pillows, basically doing snow angels. It felt weirdly intimate, exploring every inch of the bed’s surface, reaching out to find all its secrets, but Jeremy’s done this a hundred times.

His sheets, they were nice, smooth. Such a nice textile. It’s relaxing, stimming himself after a long or stressful day, and it helped keep his mind quiet for a little. So he laid there slack, for minutes on end, sprawled out against his bed with his eyes closed.

But it always lead to the same activity, because as good as stimming felt, it dwindled down after a while, and of course, Jeremy’s impressively high libido always gets the best of him some way or the other.

So it wasn’t long before his thoughts lead themselves away and lingered elsewhere.

It wasn’t long before the boy had flipped himself over so his back pressed down against the bed, either.

And it definitely wasn’t long before he started shallowly brushing down his ribcage with one of his hands, the other scrambling for his phone.

Porn.

Jeremy didn’t know where he’d be without it. He visited sites sometimes three times a day, and started off a lot of mornings (ones he woke up early enough for) with a trip into the archives.

The screen flickered awake with a text from Michael on his homescreen. Somehow, he managed to haphazardly respond to his message regarding Jeremy’s opinion on the new design of a particular character from a recently remastered game.

His thumb flew across the screen hurriedly, probably making his short response look more like a keyboard jumble than a coherent response, but he’d sent it anyway.

Then he tabbed out, going to some Safari page that was already in private mode (thanks, previous Jeremy for saving him two seconds of precious time), and quickly typed the letter ‘p’ into the search bar. Of course, Jeremy’s done this too many times for it not to immediately autofill to PornHub.

What? He was a teenage boy for fuck’s sake, sue him for having hormones.

So Jeremy quickly reached down past his abdomen, teasing himself by grazing his fingers against the firm fabric holding his length hostage while his eyes drew to the screen.

He murmured contently, the fondling not really doing much for him yet, but that’s how Jeremy liked to start things off. Nice and easy, just to diffuse some pleasure, just to build himself up.

He didn’t really know what he was in the mood for, explicitly. Generally he just browsed the popular videos tab until something sparked his interest, but Jeremy felt needy for something in specific, he just didn’t know what. He just wanted it now.

Okay… maybe he had a clue as to what he wanted to watch, but he’s never done it before. And it was kind of terrifying, but really, really intriguing for some reason. Maybe it was just some
animalistic, lust-driven selfishness, but all of his logical thoughts had clearly made their leave, so Jeremy didn’t have much of a chance anymore.

He was too flustered, too warm, and too deep in to go back on himself. Jeremy couldn’t just ward away his cravings anymore, so he gulped down his pride and hesitantly typed in three letters.

*Gay.*

He’s searched ‘*lesbian*’ before— any guy who thought they were straight probably has at some point— but he didn’t really see the intrigue.

Sure, women were hot, but he didn’t understand why dudes fetishized lesbian sex so much. He concluded the category just wasn’t for him after a few sessions and went back to straight porn.

But well, Jeremy’s never— in the month or so he’s known about his sexuality— once checked out the gay category. There was one time in like, the seventh grade, but that was because of a misclick.

He swore to himself, as his finger dragged down a list of titles and thumbnails, that this was just because of sheer curiosity, like he was still trying to use a pretense to protect his straight identity.

But this wasn’t just some business venture, this wasn’t a ‘just because he was curious’ situation, he was physically *palming* himself through his briefs. Thumbnails flashed by, and just like straight porn, he couldn’t find anything he was interested in. Most were home videos and the boys in the previews just weren’t his type.

He wasn’t really sure what his type was, but he better not think about it too long. Not that he could, anyways, he was too busy revelling in the embarrassment that he was actually on the *gay* section of *Pornhub*, unironically.

Jeremy, red in the face, clicked on a video of some mostly hairless guy supposedly jacking off in front of a camera. His face was out of frame and hidden, but his body looked… nice. Not too buff (there were a lot of bodybuilders in the gay porn industry apparently, definitely not Jeremy’s type), with a pretty average, maybe a little above average BMI.

If his skin was just more tan and warm-toned, he’d almost look like—

Jeremy choked on his own thoughts and froze his hand— his face, if it could, went redder. No, now’s not the time to think about him.

He glossed over the train of thought, melted back into his sheets and pressed play, letting his levitating hand fall back onto his briefs. Honestly, his face was hot already, one from humiliation, and two, the obvious, from arousal.

After a few seconds in, the guy started making gruff, breathy groans, which really started setting Jeremy off. He didn’t know he even *liked* hearing those noises, but they sounded so husky and so not like the soft noises Jeremy was making.

He’ll never even fucking dare to admit that those sounds coming through his headphones were familiar, or that they were reminiscent of that same Saturday’s morning. Still, in the moment, Jeremy spread his legs a little further apart, and curled his fingers underneath the waistline.

Jeremy’s breaths got quicker, progressively more warm, and more shallow as he toyed with his base. He wasn’t even looking at the footage anymore, it was just the noises now swallowing Jeremy in gentle tingles, so he shut his eyes and tilted his head skywards. His hand developed some rhythm, inching a little more up his length with every pump.
Never in a million years would Jeremy ever think to find himself here, in his bed with weak knees and a needy hand, arching his back at the sweet song of some stranger— some male stranger— getting off. Wasn’t he straight a month ago?

Apparently not, because his cheeks were flushed, his chest inflamed, and his eyes fluttered hazily. At one particular upstroke, he huffed out a high breath, his lips parting before he bit down on the bottom half to keep himself quiet.

His throat garbled out a moan, and his skin started getting balmy. Sometimes the man would dirty talk, and that drove Jeremy crazy. Though frankly, he still wasn’t really focused on the video, his body had just become a broken stenograph of hot thrills tracing down to his hips.

That’s when it happened, and Jeremy swore on his life, he didn’t know how it slipped his mind.

One of his hands were wrapped around himself, while the other clutched tightly at his phone for some grounding leverage. The phone, though he wasn’t really looking at it, was still pointed downwards on his chest, and when it buzzed, Jeremy had the great fucking idea to check whatever notification bothered interrupting him.

Of course, it wasn’t abnormal for Jeremy to multitask, but he was a little too in the moment to focus on anything else.

He tilted it just a little up to his face before realizing that the video had already ended, to his surprise. He didn’t even realize the audio had stopped, he honestly didn’t remember when it had.

Soft, and kind of loud noises slid past his lips subconsciously, and Jeremy couldn’t stop them if he tried. It was like he didn’t even have control of his own body anymore, or his thoughts, or his feelings. The zerg rush of euphoria felt fucking amazing anyways, limb control or no limb control.

So without having any logic to stop himself, his finger absent-mindedly clicked onto the notification, opening back up the iMessage tab and oh, wow, okay that’s a photo of Michael.

Jeremy’s breath got knocked out of him, and really, he did try to pry his eyes away, but he just ended up craning his neck to see the picture better. It’s a selfie, a bathroom selfie of Michael from the mirror, wearing his white Ghostbusters t-shirt with their old 80’s logo.

Notably, it’s too tight on him, but he loves to wear it to bed anyway. So yeah, because Jeremy’s brain had basically shut off whatever part controlled rational thinking (and movement control), he just kept going, kept pumping his hand and kept panting into the air.

A frisson of heat surged down his spine and ran down his limbs. That was probably the point where Jeremy just said fuck it, and really, he shouldn’t have.

Sometimes, he looked down at Michael’s selfie. The caption attached was a non-sequitur about whether or not Jeremy used hair-gel (to which the answer was only sometimes), but eventually some irking thoughts about how morally wrong it was knocked some sense into him.

So he slapped his phone against his chest, running the newly freed hand through his hair.

His nape was a little sweaty, but so was the rest of Jeremy. He was hot, flustered, chest heaving and breaths quick and soft. Somehow, his eyes still were innocent and bright— and fuck, he’d love for Michael to see him like this.

Sure, he’d stopped looking at that stupid photo, but he couldn’t save himself anymore than that. He still had the ghost of Michael rattling in his head.
And God, Michael was hot.

Jeremy thought about Michael’s morning voice and his groans and sinful sighs, and really— really, he’s being serious—he didn’t try to think about them. He didn’t like lingering on those thoughts either, he didn’t want to imagine Michael’s voice crooning praise about how ‘you’re doing so good’ or that ‘you look pretty, all ruined like this’, he didn’t mean to gasp Michael’s name or whine when he thumbed over his head.

Because he knew he shouldn’t be doing this, he knew in retrospect that yeah, it was pretty fucking weird to jack off to the thought of your best, best friend.

**THREE no thoughts about him sexually, seriously, he’s your best friend.**

But in the moment, he did anyway. Of course, because no matter how no matter how many stupid LAWS and BARRIERS Jeremy set for himself, Michael broke down every single one of them just through being himself.

So Jeremy clinched his eyes shut. He was breathing hotly onto his own chest now, euphoria tickling his nerves and exhausting his muscles. Sweat prespired over his arms and forehead, but he didn’t care enough to wipe it off.

Shivers and uneasy breaths, hot coils turning in his stomach, leaking, and a tightness in his abdomen all heralded one thing.

“M— Michael,” Jeremy whimpered, flicking his wrist up. It felt so good saying his name, it made him feel real, and here, and like he was the one touching Jeremy, making him feel good. His cock was gilded in a thin layer of precome, and his hand slicked back and forth easily. Jeremy hated himself for peeking at his phone again, but he couldn’t help it.

Jeremy couldn’t help himself from anything anymore, he was too deep in. He was drowning, drowning in this guilty sense of pleasure, but God, he so wanted to be swallowed by it anyway.

He didn’t put up a fight anymore, he didn’t clash against the waves or the tides or the whirlpool that was devouring him. Here he was, complicit, swimming into the eye of the storm because he’s selfish, he’s thinking about Michael, thinking about what Michael could do to him, thinking about how much he needs Michael.

“Micah,” Jeremy softly panted, imagining that Michael was here, hovering above him and teasing him. He wished he was.

His spine honeyed into the sheets, his neck threw back into the pillows and he arched his hips upwards, desperate.

God, his morals! Did they just disappear? The shame and humiliation and reproach should be detering him, shouldn’t it? Maybe he was just selfish, maybe he was sick and morally twisted but Jeremy just didn’t care anymore.

Something about it being so bad, so so bad, somehow, somehow, made it feel good; like knowing he shouldn’t be doing this just made it better.

Jeremy whined at the throbbing south of his hips, he really needed release, and well, fantasizing
didn’t hurt anyone.

So he quickened; he quickened his hand, rolled his thumb around the crown, dragged his fingertips across the bottom strip of his member, and buried his room’s sound out with moans and wet pants — burrowing himself into greedy hedonism.

The knot in his abdomen tightened, his heartbeat quickened and thoughts blurred together.

And one last sweep from his nimble fingers sent him into a streak of decadent, white-out pleasure. Jeremy tried to bite his lip and stifle himself to protect a smidge of his dignity, but a string of broken moans and “Michael”’s just slipped out.

His body jutted up and froze; his heaving breaths hitched; his mind blanked.

He didn’t even notice he was still gripping himself up it became painful with sensory overload. Jeremy didn’t even know his thighs were shaking either until he grabbed a tissue to clean himself off.

Jeremy would’ve usually passed out in the afterglow, like he did almost any other night, but the realization of what he just did seeped into him and leaked into his bloodstream too soon. Guilt chipped away at him the moment he trashed his scrunched up tissue paper.

He sunk back into his blankets and pulled up his briefs, suddenly very self-conscious and very abashed.

He just, he just thought about Michael, and jacked off.

That’s gross. That’s disgusting. He should’ve stopped himself, so why didn’t he?

Jeremy couldn’t even bask happily in the afterglow of what was probably one of the best orgasms he’s ever had. His body was still trembling, but now there was a tight knot in his throat.

He moaned Michael’s name.

You know, Michael, like Michael, the guy Jeremy’s known all his life? That dork who made his ringtone the Galaga soundtrack? The dude who spent five years worth of saved up birthday money on one ridiculous shopping spree at Best Buy? Jeremy’s best, best friend?

This was the same Michael that sometimes slept in this bed. Jeremy cringed at the thought, and looked down at his curled hands in disgust.

Like he couldn’t believe himself, like he just sunk to a new low— and maybe he had, jerking off to the thought of your best friend seemed pretty low.

Okay, in fairness, Jeremy hadn’t really meant to… think, about Michael. He’d just bled into Jeremy’s thoughts— all those repressed thoughts just sprung out— and well, he didn’t leave. That photo, too, he’ll have to delete it from their chat logs, because just thinking about— and the way it made Jeremy feel— made the boy shiver.

Still, he fucked up. He couldn’t deny it no matter how much he wanted to. He tucked his head away and stared at the wall closest to his bed. Like he didn’t deserve to look at anything else.

He was grossed out, but not because of bathroom grout or agnails or cafeteria food. No, those were things he could at least forget about, or avoid, but this, this repulsion, it was because of himself.
And he couldn’t run away from himself.

Jeremy winced, cowering himself into a C shape, clutching his stomach like he was stabbed, and trying, trying so hard, to stop thinking.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have to think. Not-thinking wasn’t even an escape. That low, dirty feeling in his abdomen, that nausea and loathing that washed over him, spoke for itself.

What was he supposed to do now? Act like nothing was different? Of course, that’s what he had to do, but his chest felt so heavy, and the air around him felt musty, old, and judgemental. He choked in his attempts to breathe.

It itched away at him, that gross feeling crept up his legs and wormed under his skin—and he wanted to throw up. He needed a shower, too, but it was late enough into the night that Mr Heere would definitely ask questions (what would Jeremy even say to that? ‘I’m trying to cleanse myself of sin’?), plus, there was no heat.

Not that he deserved the luxury of a warm shower anyway.

After all, Jeremy was still trying to come to terms with the fact that he did that, that thing, something he physically swore to himself he’d never do. Where was his self-control? Where was his perseverance?

Jeremy hated himself more than he ever had before. Tears pricked at his eyes, but he didn’t deserve to pity himself so much, so he wiped them dry.

He swiped his phone, and opened it. There, already opened, was that photo. Jeremy shivered, deleted it, and typed his response to whatever Michael asked, knowing he’d definitely get suspicious if he just left him on read.

Without texting him goodnight, Jeremy threw his phone on the ground and molded himself into his pillow.

He was so squeamish though, and his legs kicked around in hopes to find some position that was comfortable enough to sleep in.

But to no avail, because nothing felt comfortable, nothing felt right, nothing was okay. Jeremy wasn’t okay.

His bed, one of the only places he considered safe, he just ruined. The sheets, the duvet, those pillows, they all just felt like reminders of minutes prior.

Staring at the wall was his only option, but he still felt watched and judged.

He shrunk himself as much as possible, his dry sobs painful as they bubbled out of his throat. The impending realization that he couldn’t even control himself anymore was so pathetic. He really was pitiful, and gross, and perverted.

Jeremy Heere was supposed to be straight. Jeremy Heere wasn’t supposed to be bisexual, he wasn’t supposed to be turned on or fantasize about men, let alone his best friend.

But here he was.

He didn’t know why Michael kept him around, because he really didn’t deserve him, especially after that. If he knew what Jeremy’s done, he probably would be out the door already. Scratch that,
Jeremy couldn’t escape his bedroom, where the walls felt like they were caving in and suffocating him. So he slammed his eyes shut and ignored his still shaking knees.

He kept the bile down and he didn’t let himself cry.

He was so angry with himself, so disgusted; so, before he drifted off into sleep, he swore it’d never happen again. It was the least he could do.

Chapter End Notes

so just a reason for why this chapter took so long its cause i actually got a job?? which is lit?? idk its only for the summer but thats just why chapters are taking a little longer!!

[NSFW SUMMARY] hi again! if you’re reading this then you’ve probably skipped the nsfw scene or are bored as shit and just want something else to read, which like, mood.

okay! so the jacking-off scene is first a prelude for next chapter’s subplot. it also serves to show how jeremy’s interest in michael is progressing. also it elaborated on the laws & barriers motif + his internal conflict.

it essentially is a scene where jeremy has sexual thoughts relating to michael, to the point where he says his name. he is then afterwards encumbered by guilt and regret for the act.

i know that jeremy is fifteen in this fic, and i know someone is probably going to bring attention to that.

yes, he is fifteen, but the vast majority of teenagers masturbate/explore their sexuality (that’s just a fact), and the scene is not between a minor below the age of consent and an adult, therefore not encouraging statutory rape.

i have upped this fic’s rating to mature (not explicit, considering the vast majority of this fic is not sexual), and have put the underage tag on.

anyway, thank you for supporting the fic none the less! this chapter included fluff smut and angst
snuff me out

Chapter Notes

hey! i know it's been like, twelve days since i last updated and i'm so sorry!

to make it up to y'all, here's a 15k chapter <3

seriously though i'm so sorry this took so long, i've been swamped at work + personal life right now :/

thank you guys for supporting me again

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday morning rolled around almost too quickly.

Of course, when Jeremy woke up, it wasn't even Sunday morning anymore. It was Sunday afternoon, sometime around twelve forty, and cursed light was already beaming through his window and across his face.

For a couple of beautiful, heavensent seconds right after his eyes fluttered open, Jeremy forgot all about yesterday night.

And then the bile flooded into the back of his throat, and again, he was reminded of how hard it was to suppress, and why it was there.

So he fought the irking urge to force himself back asleep, which clashed against his urges to throw up, drown in a bathtub, smash his head into the wall, and jump out of his window.

His insides were somehow both stuffed and hollow with pain, and the bile rattled against his stomach lining as he leaned over his bed and stood up, ultimately having decided that a shower would probably be the least regretful solution out of his list.

Hopefully standing under a waterfall of hot water— if the water tank was even refilled yet, and it probably wasn’t— would help him forget, even if it was only for a few minutes, what he did yesterday.

God, he was gross.

Jeremy was sick for all of Sunday, or at least, he felt sick for all of Sunday.
Maybe his body just decided that reeking havoc on itself would be good enough penance, but his
muddle of emotions apparently instigated some sort of persistent pseudo-sickness that kept him in a
chokehold.

So to recover, and keep his mind at bay, he hardly checked his phone, didn’t go downstairs once, and intentionally started ignoring Michael.

Just hearing or seeing his name made Jeremy wince, so he kept all contact to a minimum by saying he and his dad were doing some father-son bonding today (which really, couldn’t be further from the truth) when Michael asked to play *Left 4 Dead 2* together.

To add to that, he also declined Rich’s invite to hang out (first because Jeremy thought it was a scam, and secondly because he was in no shape to get out of bed), and succumbed to tears twice.

He didn’t even have the energy to go play games on his computer, he just rotted in his bed and wallowed in his own, confused mesh of anxiety, trying to figure himself out and failing miserably.

Sometimes he’d damn himself and attempted a few Geometry questions, just for a distraction, but most wound up unanswered, and left Jeremy more frustrated than he already was.

At some point, he opened up his window and stepped out onto the little slant of roof outside, just for the fresh air. Though, he ended up staying there for maybe hours, watching the Sun set and the night sky settle in across cotton candy clouds.

It’d been a long day filled with nothing, and even as the Sun inched down towards the horizon Jeremy still felt tears prick at him again, because his phone, stowed away in his jeans, started buzzing against his thigh again.

*iMessage* notifications from Michael had been pestering him relentlessly, and with every soft *Vrr* in Jeremy’s pocket, they got harder to neglect. The muted pangs in Jeremy’s heart begged the question as to when he’d stop ignoring Michael.

Sure, he wasn’t *really* ignoring him, per se, Jeremy had texted him a couple of times to deflect conversation and diffuse his worries, but he still didn’t know when he’d be okay enough to actually talk to him.

Okay, maybe he was ignoring him, but that was because he just didn’t know how to feel right now. He wasn’t okay, and talking to Michael just reminded him of… *things*. Things that hurt.

Maybe he deserved to be reminded of it, though. It really wasn’t right, what Jeremy did yesterday, and he should think about it, he *needed* to think about it, and how to deal with what he’s done, how to move forward.

Could he move forward? He’d have to eventually, he just… didn’t know how, yet.

Though, after a day of being alone with his thoughts, he could at least say that he’s come to terms with it, and could think about things rationally.

He was okay, maybe not completely repaired, but okay.
Jeremy was not okay.

By Monday, the thought that Jeremy was ever okay backfired after he caught a glimpse of Michael in the hallway on his way to first.

His stomach fluttered, and it wasn’t necessarily a good flutter— but it wasn’t bad, either. Like it was wavering from euphoric to gut-wrenching, completely and utterly bipolar, like as if the flutter itself was confused.

Jeremy was too though, so it was only fair. He felt like he got kicked in the abdomen but he was blushing at the same time, and really, didn’t understand how that was possible.

But it was just a glimpse, before Michael retreated around a corner towards his locker (and luckily, not seeing Jeremy), giving him some time to think, and breathe.

Breathe most importantly, because Jeremy didn’t realize he’d stopped doing that.

The school district had their students switch schedules every week, and this week Jeremy didn’t have the extra fifty minutes to prepare for a confrontation with Michael. Because hey, as luck would have it, their Geometry class was first.

But if he got through with Geometry, he’d be set for a Michael-less morning until the lunch hour. He didn’t know where he’d go from there— maybe he’d end up camping out by the dumpster behind the school or make a run for it like a convict escaping prison grounds, but Jeremy wasn’t thinking that far into the future. Short-term relief was the number one priority.

He was… scared, of Michael. Not of Michael objectively— they’ve been best friends for eleven years and really, if Jeremy had ever been scared of Michael, it would’ve worn off with the whole Sonic the Hedgehog phase he went through in middle-school— but just, seeing him, having to talk to him.

After a day of semi-ignoring him, after Saturday night and regretful decisions, it was hard not to be scared, after all, Jeremy was still recovering. He couldn’t deal with Michael’s shrewd, full brown eyes and cursed eyebrow-raising tricks that made his knees go weak right now. It’s a discomfort. A malaise, eating away at him.

And Jeremy knew, subconsciously, that he was probably digging himself a deeper grave, that eventually Michael would ask what he did on Sunday or why he wasn’t responding to his texts, but he’d make up an excuse later.

Right now, he was more concerned with begging Jenna Rolan— Jenna fucking Rolan, he’s only spoken to her maybe twice before— to sit beside him in Geometry.

It was probably about ten minutes before class started, and Jeremy had been scrambling the halls for someone he could use as a shield from Michael, but who the fuck arrived to school ten minutes early? Hardly anyone was recognizable in the halls, and most of the faces there were young freshman who still didn’t really understand the schedule and needed the extra time to find their correct class.

If Jeremy had a seating partner, then Michael would be forced to sit with someone else (and as much as he felt bad for condemning Michael to talk with other people, he needed this relief). Plus, Jenna Rolan was notorious for going with the flow, so his logic was that she’d probably say yes. He didn’t bother factoring in how popular Jenna actually was, and how she probably had four people begging to sit with her everyday.
Apparently, when you were trying to outrun your impending doom, your regular 'I'm too much of a loser, I can’t talk to popular kids’ anxiety subsided, so for once he was actually able to approach her.

And now he stood beside her, slowly registering how much of a mistake this was by her awkward silence, but he was already here. Ditching his efforts now would just guarantee skipping Geometry to sit sadly in a bathroom for fifty minutes, and he’s already had an intervention there from Michael there last week.

She closed her locker and cocked her eyebrows at Jeremy. Tucked in between her arm and her black-and-white striped tee was some notebook, but Jeremy couldn’t get a good look of what the text on the front read.

Instead, the judgemental looks from other kids in the hallway were sort of a bigger priority. Jeremy chalked it up to the fact he, a registered nobody, was talking to Jenna Rolan, who basically ruled the school.

She leaned in a little, probably aware of the stares too but not visibly freaked out about them. Why would she? These people were like peasants to her.

It dawned on Jeremy that he too, was a peasant to her, but it was too late to back out. Plus, the threat of talking to Michael right now was a tenfold scarier than Chloe Valentine with freshly manicured talons.

And Jenna was like, a third as scary as Chloe, so the math checked out out.

“Give me twenty bucks and I’ll do it.” Jenna commanded, and even if her voice wasn’t angry and snide, even if she sounded calm and easy-going, it still carried the same weight and casted the same scrutiny.

Twenty dollars?

Well, it’d be worth it.

“I— uhm, don’t have a twenty on me,” Jeremy muttered, his hand scrambling for his pockets and his backpack, like he was going to find some magically appearing note. “could, could I give you it tomorrow? I really need this.”

Jenna looked at him for a moment suspiciously, apparently put on pause— eerily looking like a Sim waiting for a command— then shrugged. “Alrighty, Heere, but if you don’t get that money I’ll rip you to shreds. Now c’mon.”

She walked with him to class (though, it looked more like she was shepherding him), guided him before the bell to one of the islands, and flipped her backpack onto the long desk, engorging into three strips of peppermint gum.

“So why do you need me to sit here? Don’t you usually sit with that Matthew kid?”

She took a seat at the same table he and Michael would. Jeremy wondered if this was on purpose or just a coincidence, but Jenna was renown for being to nosiest person in their grade, so it really wasn’t much of a question.

Still, he wouldn’t ask about it. He knew he probably shouldn’t be talking to high-ranking socialites like Jenna anyways, so he’ll keep his questions to a minimum, thank you.
Jeremy shrugged off his own backpack too, but flushed when he looked at her. “Um, his name is M-Michael. But things are kind of complicated between us right now? And I don’t have other friends… generally, to sit with? So if twenty dollars is what it’ll take to avoid confrontation then so be it?”

Jeremy had speaking issues, okay? This wasn’t new. He accidentally wore his heart on his sleeve and spilled out honesty under pressure. It’s a nervous tendency of his.

Luckily, Jenna didn’t seem to mind at all. She seemed more interested in the slightly different hue between the polish on two of her nails.

“Mmkay, that’s a little sad, but hey, twenty bucks for me.” Jenna muttered, then: “Anyway, what’s up with you and Michael that you just can’t sit with him?”

She didn’t look up at Jeremy. She was laid back in her seat and cracking her knuckles now, still curtly examining her nails.

“Oh, ohm um, well, just well.”

Jeremy had never been good lying under pressure, so he scrambled for the most generic thing he could think of off the top of his head.

“He um– he likes this girl that I like and you know um, bro code or whatever.”

Jenna looked up at him dubiously, one eye cocked up satirically. She looked almost amused at how easily she could see through him.

“Pft. Nice one, Heere, but Michael’s gay as fuck.”

She said that so calmly, like it was some widely accepted, well received fact. A constant, like how Justin Bieber was and would always be the most well known Canadian celebrity, or how McDonald’s fries aren’t necessarily good, but have this weird, greasy allure to them.

Jeremy just found out he was gay like, a month ago. How long did Jenna know?

“H– how do you know that? You, you didn’t even know his name.” Jeremy retorted, but it was dry, dull, and his voice came out broken. He didn’t even notice how little he was salivating until his mouth huffed out dust.

Jenna laughed, Jenna Rolan— Jeremy couldn’t stress that enough, because seriously, Jenna Rolan — laughed. It sounded more like a snort, a very condescending snort.

“I know things, Jeremy. There’s this whole network I’ve got and I know almost everything there is to know about anyone.” Jenna said matter-of-factly, and her eyes, which were a pretty neutral, hazel-green, suddenly bore a piercing hole into his skull, like she was looking for dirt on him, and digging through his memories.

It made Jeremy feel a little too vulnerable than he’d like to feel to on a Monday morning before his first class even started.

Luckily, her deathly grip between her crossed brows loosened quickly. “Plus, the kid wears a fucking pride patch on his arm and he’s never dated anyone. It’s in the archives, he’s gay as shit, and if he’s had a boyfriend before, then they’ve kept it a secret.”

“Oh, that reminds me, are you dating him?”
Jeremy blinked, apparently kids were now filing into class, so he forced himself down and shook his head no, not being able to get words out anymore. Despite his best efforts, his tongue was a tumbleweed bouncing in the desert of his mouth.

But as much as Jenna didn’t seem to care, she still had some weird motherly aura to Jeremy. Maybe her voice just didn’t sound so empty and uncaring as it should.

“O–oh, okay.”

Jeremy grabbed out his bag and tried to look away and act casually when Michael shuffled into class, but frankly, the effort was lost.

Michael retained full eye contact with Jeremy as he sat down, and even if Jeremy tried to act like he didn’t understand what he was saying, he knew well how confused Michael was just by the furrowed look on his face. His eyes, shooting daggers, teemed with ‘What the fuck is Jenna Rolan doing in my seat?’.

But Michael didn’t speak up or waltz over to interrogate, luckily. He just shrugged it off, sat down, and hey, there’s that Vrr in Jeremy’s pocket again. He pretended like he didn’t notice it and just poured over his desk instead.

Ms Harper obviously realized something was up too, because she sometimes casted uneasy glances towards Michael and him, but she knew better now than to meddle in with Jeremy’s business. Last time she did resulted in a very awkward exchange before Band practice about his anxiety.

Jeremy tried, really, he did, to not look at Michael. Some promises though, were just meant to be broken.

Jeremy maintained his Michael Free Monday throughout the rest of his classes. At some point, it became a challenge to prove that he wasn’t so codependent on him.

He also noticed Michael progressively getting more frustrated, trying harder to find some window to talk to him, but Jeremy had his own tricks up his sleeve.

Those tricks up his sleeve included his dexterity in hallway-surfing, his doctor’s appointment at 12:45 that he initially forgot about until his dad texted him, a convenient time table, and other ‘friends’ (Jeremy was still a little shaky on calling them that) to use as conversation defense.

Plus, Michael and Jeremy started getting a noticeable amount of attention from the general student body on Monday, and not bad attention either, which was really the only attention they were used to.

People looked at him in the halls, some girl came up to Jeremy and asked for his number text (thanks, but no thanks, maybe yes if she’d asked a month ago; though he still gave her it just so she wouldn’t cause a fuss), and he totaled 13 new follower requests on Instagram by Lunch.

He actually ended up asking Rich about it in Chemistry: where this sudden boom in popularity (though, it probably wasn’t a ‘boom’ to someone like Rich) came from, and he shrugged it off and
said that Jeremy was ‘finally climbing the social ladder’.

Jeremy would’ve freaked out over that idea because freshman Jeremy could only dream of that happening, but then Rich promptly sang ‘You’re Welcome’ from Moana, and that was just a little more attention grabbing. He had a surprisingly good voice for someone who probably did steroids.

Either way, after his doctor’s appointment— where he also got two vaccines, and he hated needles, so ugh— Jeremy and his dad went home, figuring that going back to school for fifteen minutes of his last period wasn’t worth the drive.

Tuesday morning passed a lot like Monday’s.

Jeremy brought forty dollars to school to pay for Jenna’s services again, continued to get confused side-eyes from Michael, hid himself in the bathroom twice, and expertly chose each route to his classes based around the ones Michael usually would, just so they wouldn’t interact.

Jeremy got into the habit of keeping his eyes astray and away from Michael, because everytime their eyes met, the slight, puzzled hurt in Michael’s deep-brown orbs only made Jeremy squirm with guilt.

Michael didn’t know what was wrong, and he couldn’t know what was wrong. Michael isn’t allowed to know, because that would lead to an event more catastrophic than the mess they already were in.

You’d think with all this ignoring Jeremy’s been doing to Michael, his feelings for him would dissipate, but nope! His heartache just doubled in intensity.

So Jeremy kept silent, and blended into crowds at every chance he got, merging with a group and never letting himself be singled out. He’s paranoid, but that’s okay. He had reason to be.

Because Michael has gotten more and more inquisitive about Jeremy’s abeyance with time. He hasn’t responded to any iMessage notification since Sunday and Michael, by now, definitely knew something was up.

The question of what Jeremy was supposed to tell Michael when he’d finally crack was impending. He seriously didn’t know, and was seriously freaking out about it.

For now, he was fine. He was in Chemistry, raising his hand to go for a bathroom break, and he was fine.

He’ll only have to worry for that five minute intermission between periods, but he’ll be okay for those too. Jeremy knew his routes well enough to avoid Michael. No use stressing about it.

Lunch was probably the biggest problem, but he’ll make it out alive there, too. He wasn’t exactly sure how, and he was biting his lip nervously trying to devise some plan, but he came up empty handed.

Yesterday he camped out his break in some abandoned Art classroom, so he just, for now, hoped that it’d be empty again. If not well, then he’d probably resort to some supply closet, because he’s pathetic and wouldn’t mind it if it meant a little more time to think.
“Yes, Jeremy, go ahead.” Mrs Lawson pardonned, sweeping her hand in acknowledgement.

Jeremy almost forgot his hand was up. Now it was pale, and felt ridden of blood. He shrugged it down to his side, shaking it to life and rushed himself to the door, making sure to mutter a ‘thank you’ under his breath as he passed his teacher.

The hallways were decorated in silver and red tinsel to advertise the homecoming dance. After a few moments of squinting at the exaggerated curlicues of the date off of some poster, he parced together that the dance was tomorrow.

Jeremy only knew about homecoming in the first place because Rich has been getting on his ass about it, cracking jokes about how his girlfriend-less (and boyfriend-less, as Rich loved to reminded him that being gay was in fact, an option) stasis.

It was early October— though Jeremy didn’t really know the day— and the same trims and decor were used last year. There was also banners hanging off the walls, dangling signs and refurbished lockers.

And it was pretty, the decor. Whoever did it had a taste for design, because for some shitty Dollar Tree streamers and buntings, the colour coordination had some flow to it, and was definitely aesthetically pleasing.

Jeremy’s eyes traced down some homemade pennant donning Middleborough’s Knight insignia and metallic lining, until voices from up ahead bounced off the walls, and his heart stopped in surprise.

“I dunno. It’s good to have some fresh blood in the group. You’re great, man.”

That’s Jake’s voice? Jake Dillinger’s.

Jeremy squared his shoulders and halted his feet, right before the turn he’d been approaching.

He wasn’t really sure what class Jake was supposed to be in right now, or who he was talking to, but Jeremy’s spine went ramrod straight, and like the overly suspicious cat, Jeremy’s first instinct was to investigate.

“I don’t really see how,” Michael replied, Michael replied. So it’s Michael talking to Jake, cool, that same Michael Jeremy was trying to ignore, cool.

What’s Jake doing talking to Micah?

Their words seemed loud, ricocheting off metal lockers and echoing down his hallway. He wondered if they were disturbing some classroom near here, but Jeremy’s always had impressive hearing, so probably not.

He shimmied a little closer to the corner to hear better, simply on a whim of dull curiosity.

“Well, it’s just, you go with the flow. You’re just so laidback and everything— and we all need a person like that sometimes, y’feel?”

Jeremy’s interest peaked on Jake’s words, and he peeped his eyes around the corner. Jake and Michael were standing too distantly to notice him.

So while Jeremy’s face was near hidden by some beam, he could still see Michael shrug at the other end of the hallway. He craned his head, thanking God for his keen ears. “Not really, but
“See! That’s your thing! You just roll with it, man, you’re just so much more real. There’s probably a lot people who would love to chill with my whole group, but they’re fake. They only want to because I’m apparently the coolest guy in the school and Chloe’s hot.” Jake said, then, to recover: “Not to uhm, not to sound vain or narcissistic or whatever.”


The jealousy that curled his toes was unbidden and stupid. Michael isn’t his, and Jeremy shouldn’t care if he’s getting along with the popular, athletic, handsome Jake Dillinger. He should be happy, actually, that his friends are intermingling and that they’re finally ‘climbing up the social ladder’ at Middleborough.

Still, that sudden sour taste in Jeremy’s mouth was undeniable, and his face was bereft of colour. Something about hearing Jake talk so fondly about Michael twisted Jeremy’s opinion about him. But Jeremy didn’t hold grudges. So it’ll die soon, probably.

But for now, it’s alive and well, so Jeremy flitted back to the corner he’d just peeked around, and subtly eavesdropped on their conversation. He probably shouldn’t, but Michael will probably tell him about it anyways— whenever Jeremy decides to stop ignoring him— so there’s not much harm done.

“No worries.” Michael dipped his head in acknowledgement, and ugh, Jeremy shouldn’t care but he definitely does. Maybe he just didn’t want his position as best, best friend of Michael Mell to be threatened? He didn’t really know what was keeping him here, frozen and quiet behind the corner.

Like there was some unhealthy intrigue chaining him to the ground, making sure he was listening to this probably irrelevant conversation because of what? Because of a slight twinge of jealousy? All Michael was doing was just talking to Jake and Jeremy’s feelings were having a hissy-fit.

“But I mean like, so many people would wanna hang out with us because we’re the popular kids and they want social status or whatever.” Jake started, his voice elated.

“It’s just, it’s really nice to have someone real join the group, because everyone expects me to be a trendsetter or whatever, and talk about gossip and who’s fucking who and act like a bro. When everyone’s so fake like that, sometimes you forget who you actually are.”

“And it sounds like the most first-world problem ever but you guys, you guys don’t care about all that, it’s refreshing I guess.”

Jake’s flattery for Michael wasn’t helping Jeremy’s mesh of emotions. Yeah, he knew rationally that Jake was probably straight, and that they were just new friends and whatever, but his heart jumped to conclusions immediately.

It wouldn’t matter if those conclusions were correct anyways, Michael wasn’t his. Regardless, Jeremy was nosy, so he continued tuning in.

Michael mused. “Wow uhm, well, it’s nice to know you’re not a fucking robot, but I mean, I can’t really relate.”

“I’ve been a residential loser for like, all of my life, but I can see how it could get bothersome if everyone just wants you for like, your dick. It’s shallow, I guess.”

Michael’s voice didn’t sound self-deprecating or sad, and while yeah, he’s always been the
optimistic and the okay one with them being losers, Jeremy just thought that was an act Michael played around him to make him feel better. So that Jeremy didn’t feel like he was dragging Michael down.

It’s refreshing to know he actually was content where he is. Warmed Jeremy’s heart, because sometimes he really did feel like he was holding Michael back from social acceptance.

“Yeah. You guys were constantly ripped on last year, even Rich has been a dick to you, and still, you just go with it. That’s something I can really respect, bro.” Jake said, and even though Jeremy had ducked his head back out of sight, Jake was probably prompting Michael for a high five.

Jeremy heard a small slap echo through the hallway followed by soft chuckles, so yeah, he was right.

It’s that iconic sound of the Jock High Five, the one that your bro gave you after you tell him you’ve scored with a cheerleader, or won a varsity scholarship, or successfully pranked the headmaster by taping all of his office supplies together, Jeremy’s seen the movies.

“I dunno. You’re just, really cool, in my opinion, the boys might disagree with me. And heere’s a little shy, but I would be too in his position, so I can’t really blame him.”

Frankly, Jake sounded like an excited boy scout, chortling fondly after sentences. It was… kind of endearing, and Jeremy hated it, because Michael probably thought the exact same thing. He seemed like the type of guy to like Jake’s happy-go-lucky, ‘I try to impress everyone I know’ charm.

“Takes time, I guess. Anyway, thank you man, and for the notes or I’d be f***ed for this next quiz.”

“No problem, I got full access to the photocopier and I seriously have no clue why.” said Jake. “Anyway, see you.”

“See ya.”

Jeremy heard shuffling of feet, and instantly, his heart retched out into his throat with panic. He immediately turned himself on his heels and started walking down the same corridor, his eyes shooting both ways for a bathroom sign, but finding nothing.

Luckily, he didn’t hear Michael’s voice call from behind him, which probably meant he went the other way. That also meant Jake was probably somewhere behind him, but he didn’t say anything to Jeremy either.

Jeremy was safe, again, though his heart was hammering in his hot ears.

Jeremy was a curious guy, alright? And as much as he was the one ignoring Michael, he still missed hearing his voice sometimes.

Plus, he wanted to know what was up with Jake, if he’s honest: why he was talking to Michael and to simply get to know his character a little better.

Jake’s new, and confusing, and his personality completely contradicted itself— seriously, a dumb jock that cared about something like real friendship and complimented people? Those archetypes didn’t match up.

And sure, Jeremy might’ve had a crush on Michael— or was in love with him or whatever — and
maybe that was also something that driven him to eavesdrop, but he was still generally protective
of his best friend. He was allowed to be, best friends were allowed to be concerned for one another.

Best friends also didn’t ignore each other, but Jeremy will face him soon enough. He just needed to
figure out how.

Jeremy didn’t know when exactly he’d be ready to face Michael, but the lunch hour was definitely
too soon.

For one, after the halls were clear, he cautiously ambled out of Band and snuck out to the Art
department, checking every classroom on the way there for on-break teachers who’d left their
classroom.

Yes, he knew he was supposed to get permission to use an empty classroom as a refugee camp, but
really, his social anxiety begged otherwise. He scouted out for that dusty room from yesterday, the
one the school used as a storage closet, and cowardly stalked the far sides of the hall.

Being the only person left in a hallway was scary. No one else there meant no one else to hide
behind, and that, that was a terrifying prospect. He felt vulnerable.

So his back was arched— not necessarily arched, but twisted over. His back was slouched,
hunched over like Quasimodo, as he droned ledge of the hall.

It should be fine, really, everyone else was either off campus or in the cafeteria— Middleborough
had some policy against its students eating in the halls, so they were mostly deserted for the lunch
hour— but Jeremy was still paranoid.

Sue him for having silly things like survival instincts.

Either way, it didn’t end up being the trip to the same abandoned classroom that did it for him. It
was a stupid bathroom break— where his guard was down— when he was forced to face Michael.

Jeremy was on his way back, on his way back into the musty air of a dilapidated Art room, feet
kicking against dirty tile and eyes lazily switching from his phone to the window to the doors. A
quiet hum in his ears, other than the shuffling of his feet.

Until a voice barked behind him.

“Hey! Jeremy!”

Of course.

He breathed in sharply, the natural monotony in his ears coming to a standstill. Unfortunately,
before Jeremy could even process anything mentally, his physical body betrayed him, and shivered
when a fast shock traced down his spine, freezing his limbs in place.

“O-oh, hi- hi, Mich— Michael.”

Before Jeremy could even register the shuffle of fast footsteps behind him, Michael’s furrowed
brow was uncomfortably close and staring straight at Jeremy’s forehead.

He looked like an angry, disappointed mother staring down her kid after they came home drunk after curfew— except well, a lot hotter than an angry mother could ever be. Jeremy swallowed deeply, and let fear overtake those thoughts, plummeting like a failed rocket launch into his abdomen.

“What, what do you mean? ‘Hi Michael?’ You’ve been ignoring me for days! What—” Michael started, parting his maddening eyes off Jeremy. He ran his hand through his head of hair quickly. “What’s up with you?”

Jeremy threw his head away from his numb spot and forcibly looked to the lockers on the other end of the hall. He was… dizzy, confused, scared, and really, really tense.

Of course he fucking was, Michael was right here; like Michael his best friend Michael, the Michael who constantly calmed him down, his crush Michael, that Michael from that picture with the vintage *Ghostbusters* t-shirt?

The last person Jeremy wanted to see right now?

“I— um, I don’t know. I’m— I’m very sorry. I really, really did want to talk to you but I,”

Oh no, Michael was using a serious face— his *serious* face.

Okay, yup. Jeremy was on the verge of a panic attack, not being able to get the right words out, his hand clinging to the back of his hair, his face both unusually pallid but sporting hot, vibrant red splotches over his cheeks. “I don’t… I don’t know.”

Michael’s arm suddenly shot out beside Jeremy’s neck. He shuddered against the sounding bang from the lockers.

“Jeremy, seriously? It’s just— just—you never ignore me unless something’s up. Are you alright? Did— did I do something?”

His other arm reached skywards of Jeremy’s head, out of sight, but the audible clash of metal against fist assured Jeremy that it’d made contact. Michael’s body now took up most of what Jeremy could see.

It would’ve been a pretty hot, compromising position to find himself in if Jeremy wasn’t teetering on the edge of crying, with a lump in his throat making it near impossible to breathe.

Still, his face was definitely pink, without a doubt— whether that be from anger or arousal or embarrassment or fear.

Those cold moments from Saturday night flashed by— and ugh, couldn’t Jeremy catch a break?

No. No he could not.

“N–no of, of course not, Micah,”— God damnit Jeremy, *now* is *not* the time for stupidly cute platonic nicknames— “I’ve– I’ve just had a lot uhm, on my mind, and I felt sick yesterday and so erm, irritable and I just didn’t want to talk to anyone and I’m so— I’m really sorry um.”

Yeah, that threat of a panic attack quickly became a reality he had to face. Being pinned up against lockers by your month-long pining victim should be hot and all, but when you’re an already anxious kid, and you’ve been ignoring said person for days and his usually kind, praising eyes were
yellow and sharp with anger? Jeremy was fucking terrified.

So when Sunday’s guilt and sickness crawled back into his stomach in one strong, guttural twist, Jeremy realized he was having a panic attack.

Michael didn’t realize, or at least not soon enough.

He didn’t even realize anything was wrong until hot tears pricked Jeremy’s waterline and flooded his vision, until his lip pouted and quivered, until his fast, but quiet breaths turned into physical gasps out of his mouth, trying to overcome that lump, trying to breathe.

Jeremy knew, in his peripherals, that it was just them in the hallway, but everything seemed to zone in on Michael anyway.

It’s like whether or not his expression was good or bad meant life or death, and right now, that furrowed brow and that pulsing vein under his hair— it meant death.

Christ, Jeremy was freaking out, and the scratchy buzz in his head wasn’t quieted when Michael’s face softened, or when he finally realized.

Really, the noise only unwinded when Michael’s fingers pressed gently against Jeremy’s features, angry eyes turning to worried.

But Jeremy still felt gross when Michael’s arms wrapped him in a hug. He didn’t deserve to be comforted. He did this to himself, he should pay the price for it, he should have some punishment for what he did—

“Whoa, Jere, woa, it’s— it’s okay. I just get scared when you ignore me like that.”

But it felt safe here, nested in Michael’s arms, so Jeremy leaned his head into the crooks of Michael’s neck and rested it there.

He didn’t cry. In school, Jeremy couldn’t cry. It took a lot of effort, but he blinked away those stupid, stupid tears.

Jeremy didn’t know how long he would’ve been able to keep up with the avoidance act— hell, he barely went two days without him— but he’d been hoping that it would’ve lasted longer. Just a little longer, just until Jeremy knew how to think again. He’d really convinced himself that this grace period would take as long as he needed. He thought he was better, that he had some self-control, enough to not fall back into Michael again.

“I don’t know what’s going on with you man, but I’m worried about you. You’ve been… acting weird. It’s scary.” Michael confided, and only in Jeremy’s ear would he ever admit to being scared. That never changed.

Change.

Michael never changed, he was the same Michael, the different, but not so different Michael Mell. The only thing that’s ever changed about him was Jeremy’s feelings towards him.

And yeah. Those hadn’t changed since Friday. He still madly loves Michael, everything about him: the oaky vanilla scent of his hoodie, the comforting gentleness of his hand massaging into Jeremy’s nape, his sweet gestures and stunning looks.

Why? Because Michael silenced all those voices in his head. He let Jeremy think clearly and feel
secure. Even if it was just momentarily, even if he still felt the underbelly of shame glowering on
him, Jeremy was always okay when he was with Michael.

“I’m really sor– sorry, for ignoring you. I guess I just got caught up in my own head and self-
consciousness and well— I don’t know. I don’t know why I’ve been so distant.”

Michael let out a long, inscrutable sigh. It sounded disappointed, maybe wistful, maybe bored.

Maybe he wanted answers, Jeremy would if he was him. “That’s… okay, Jer. Are, are you better
now?”

Jeremy shrugged, his shoulders pressing against Michael’s. Was he better? He didn’t know
himself, really. Could things just go back to normal in his head?

They’ll have to. Michael’s friendship was too good to lose and he hated ignoring him. He couldn’t
do it any longer even if he wanted to.

Plus, right now, Saturday night felt like it didn’t even happen.

Yes, objectively, he was still grossed out by himself. What Jeremy did… it wasn’t right, it was
weird and he shouldn’t ever be proud of it. He wasn’t proud of it.

But he needed to move on. Michael let him move on.

He just won’t do it again, Jeremy promised himself that. So he gritted his teeth and hugged a little
tighter, because really, Jeremy missed this.

“Yes— yeah. I am, and again, I’m really sorry for everything.”

That ‘everything’ meant a little more than just ignoring him, but Michael couldn’t know that. It was
a sorry for loving him, a sorry for breaking rules, a sorry for acting strange and a sorry for
Saturday.

Michael nodded and let himself loose from the hug. Jeremy felt like a part of himself was missing,
but he muttered “Thank you” anyway— Michael was being patient and kind and caring and really,
he was too good for him.

Though, Jeremy didn’t think about that. Instead, they were both smiling, eyes creasing, and lips
stretching ear-to-ear. “It’s okay bud, can we– could we just hang out again?” Michael asked
tentatively, and even though they were apart, Michael’s hand softly swung from his side, grazing
down Jeremy’s wrist and intertwining their fingers together.

Jeremy blushed, but nodded, because yeah. They could. They could hang out again. Jeremy will
live this— Saturday— down and life will go on. He didn’t bother overthinking Michael’s gesture,
it’d only lead him further down the rabbit-hole, so he just squeezed into Michael’s palm and
grinned.

Michael’s hand was warm in his. Somehow, despite his confident, bold élan, Michael’s touch was
tender, kissing his skin

Journal, my journal. I’ll write this down and freak out about it later.

And even though Jeremy was in the aftershocks of a literal panic attack, his broken smile was still
genuine and sincere, shining through a wasteland of glass shards. “Sure—sure, does tonight work?
Tomorrow I have play rehearsal until six so.” Jeremy offered, testing his own waters.
“Yuh-huh, let’s do it. Your house?”

Jeremy nodded, but his pink face quickly turned red at the sight of a few junior boys at the end of the hallway. He slipped his hand out of Michael’s nonchalantly and let embarrassment overcome him. Michael just looked down the corridor and shrugged at the juniors.

“Yeah sure.” Jeremy shyly agreed.

If Jeremy’s day wasn’t dreary enough, a roster posted on the bulletin board beside the auditorium cemented that Jeremy had both an actual role (and wasn’t just damned to the tech crew like he’d hoped), and that his role was one of the main supporting characters.

With lots of lines.

Now Jeremy had his script— a reading of all his cues and dialogue— set very primly on the surface of his desk. He glared at it ruefully from his swivel chair stationed on the other side of the room, like as if it was mocking him, even though he already read through it on the walk home.

The scenes, well, at least the majority of them, were definitely manageable. Hopefully after two months of rehearsals and pep-talks he’ll be able to do them with ease, but right now, he wasn’t exactly worried about them.

His eyes were still staring blanking it, his mind swiveling on how to deal with the repercussions of Saturday night, and how Michael was coming over soon, and how he really needed to dust up his room a little bit before then.

So yeah, whether or not he could fake emotion for some shitty school play was, for the most part, stowed away at the back of his mind.

For the most part.

If there was one scene Jeremy was fixated on, if there was some reason as to why he was so focused on the script and not moving to clean his room (which he knew very well he had to do), it was the last one he appeared in during the end of act one.

It was a kissing scene, a kissing scene. A very passionate, and drawn out lip-smashing scene with a girl— the protagonist— who he’s never met.

Oh, boy. That’ll be fun, won’t it? He could already feel the anxiety balling up in his throat. Not only has Jeremy never kissed anyone before, but the girl was probably expecting Jake Dillinger or hell, even Ryan Tanner— they were good-looking!

The man Jeremy was playing was supposed to be some womanizing businessman, could they not have casted someone who looked the part? Or at least had some contact with women?

He steepled his hands and pushed his head, nose-first, into them. Jeremy was frustrated, his mind spinning and imagining thousands of futures where this kiss scene goes wrong. Most of them ended with him balled up on the floor in a spotlight, with a parade of echoing hysterics haunting him ’til the day he dies.
He was an amateur actor, and sure, yeah, maybe by some trick of light Mr Reyes thought he was capable enough for the role— Jeremy could say that he *kind of* nailed the audition yesterday— but he was also a virgin who didn’t even kiss his mom. Did he purposefully subject Jeremy to the role just to laugh at him?

The funding for theatre might drop because of Jeremy, but hey, he can just blame Mr Reyes, for ever thinking that *this* was a good idea.

But, now wasn’t the time to think about it, as much as he was freaking out. He’ll debate asking about switching roles or quitting the show later.

Michael would be at his house in like, half an hour. Jeremy had messes all around his chamber, empty tumblers on his beside table (because hey, his dad was apparently eco-friendly now and didn’t buy bottles of water) and the air reeked like an old book, so he squared the script perfectly on his desk and readjusted some of the trinkets around it.

Funny. He put the script right beside to a set of folded clothes from that gross night. He hasn’t wore the clothes since, not even as pyjamas.

Anyway. He was pretty sure there was *Febreze* somewhere around here, right?

---

After probably forty minutes of scouring the house for a duster refill and stuffing his homework into spare drawers in his cabinet, Michael waltzed into the Heere household.

Jeremy’s heart dropped out of his chest, but he was fine. He’ll be okay. He trained so he could be able to talk to him. He wouldn’t reveal himself.

“Michael! I told you to only use that key for *emergencies!*” yelled Jeremy from upstairs.

“Uhm, Jer, the door was already unlocked! I guess your dad just didn’t lock it on his way out?” Michael called back, and hey that’s alarming, but Jeremy was too busy scrambling to shove his journal back under his bed.

Michael met him in the threshold of his door maybe a minute later, carrying a big goodie bag from *7-Eleven* in hand. Condensation prespired over the plastic, so he probably had drinks— or better yet, ice cream.

“Hey, Jer.”

He had some sort of kind of intimidating ambience to his wide stance, especially considering their *earlier* interaction in the hallway, but it was still Michael, with that amicable smile and those kind eyes.

No sort-of-hot-but-also-really-scary encounters at school changed him. Jeremy wouldn’t let the days he ignored Michael change their routine.

So Michael sat down on the carpet, letting whatever tidbits he had in his bag roll out. Three 2L bottles of different sodas, a couple of candy bars, some bubblegum, and Jeremy’s favourite, *Krispy*
Kreme donuts, maybe to serve as a peace offering.

“Yo Michael, what’s good?” Jeremy greeted relaxedly, stuffing the house duster back into one of his clothes drawers before sitting down. It’d be no good to go put it back in the laundry room, since his dad never used it.

Michael laid his back on the ledge of Jeremy’s bed and fiddled with the opening seal of a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups while humming. “Mm, nothing much. Got some donuts for you by the way.”

Jeremy smiled, and spun over to his television to turn it on. “Aw, thanks. ‘ow about some COD Zombies? Try n’ get a new score again?”

Michael nodded, grabbed both the controllers and set the P2 one beside his own.

Jeremy scowled, Michael was very protective of his title of player one no matter the house, something Jeremy recently found adorable.

Jeremy feigned a resigned sigh and picked up the second controller. It was a prettier colour than Michael’s anyway, and really, he couldn’t get upset about it when Michael hunched over his own controller and murmured a possessive “Rawr.” at him.

Call of Duty: Zombies was one of their favourite games. They preferred it on split-screen, sitting together in Jeremy’s room or Michael’s basement, rather than using the online multiplayer mode, which most players would probably disagree with.

They really only played the pre-2012 games, preferably the classics set in the WWII era. The futuristic ones were too complicated and unrealistic, so they trashed any game past Black Ops: III.

“So, anything new I missed out on since Sunday?” Michael mused, sort of passive-aggressively.

Earlier levels made for a lot of conversation, but past level twenty-five? It was mostly stuck-out tongues, grunts, and dejected sighs.

“Um, well, unless you count low self-esteem new for me? Also, can you buy first door?”

Michael gave a curt nod, rounding up the thirteen hundred points with some score-conserving pistol techniques. “For you? That’s definitely not new, and yeah sure.”

“Hm, what’s that?” Michael asled pointedly, nudging his head to the top of Jeremy’s desk, right towards his script. “You make the cut?”

Jeremy shrugged, but his nervousness gave through in his voice crack. “Yea, I gu–ess.”

And if he wasn’t lying, Jeremy was sweating right now. Michael being so close in proximity, being in the same room from that haunting moment just three nights ago, that thought was eating at him. He pushed it down, much like the bile that was reaching up at him, and being unable to chew at his fingernails, Jeremy gnawed on a jelly donut instead.

“Mmh, nice. I’m not gonna say that I’m surprised you didn’t get tech crew, but uh, I’m surprised you didn’t get tech crew.” Michael jabbed with a chuckle, and Jeremy’s throat betrayed him, eliciting an offended, high-pitched squeak.

“Excuse me, I did really good in my audition, thank you very much.” Jeremy retorted, smashing some buttons a little rougher to get through the horde behind the door (because that’s how buttons
work. The harder you press, the more damage).

Michael laughed. “Yeah, I know. You was good when you practiced, bro. I was just worried you were going to wimp out of your audition if I’m being real.”

“Me too honestly. Scared shitless but like, I’ve been working on I guess a headspace for theatre? Where I just don’t think?” said Jeremy, his voice turning progressively more into a murmur.

It sounded a tenfold more embarrassing outloud. A red, mortified heat crept up his chest, and whoops, he shouldn’t of said anything, now he’s trying to tuck his head into his neckband to avoid humiliation in front of Michael, who has definitely seen him in much worser states, but it’s different now.

Because he liked Michael. So yeah. A little change of pace.

“That’s rad, Jer, I’m psyched to see you in the show. What’s the role you play? Mr Reyes didn’t give you the tree, did he?” joked Michael, and Jeremy noticed the glower of pink on his neck wasn’t from the embarrassment anymore. Flattery and praise killed Jeremy.

“I’m actually one of the more main characters? It’s really scary, but I have a ton of lines. Probably going to mess up a bunch.”

It’d probably be better to not mention any specifics or even think about how terrifying the prospect of performing in front of anyone—including Michael—would be. That’d probably end with Jeremy quitting the show.

“Oh puh-please, you have like, three months to get it right. You’ll do great.” Michael said, stammering a little bit while button-mashing.

Jeremy noticed a pack of zombies breaking through the windows on his screen, and Michael’s pistol had zero bullets left from trying to score enough points.

Well, scoring enough points would be wasted if Michael died in the third round, so while Michael furrowed his brow and trained the horde around a fountain, Jeremy came to the rescue and shot them down from behind.

“Oh but you know me. I’m still dummy nervous about it. I’ve hardly even read the script and I haven’t even practiced my lines yet and our first reading is tomorrow.”

Jeremy sighed, letting out a small, frustrated noise. “I just don’t want to be really awful at it. At least not the worst, yanno? There’s some scenes I know I’m gonna be terrible in.”

He wouldn’t say which scenes, but there were definitely a couple on his mind. Ahem.

Michael’s hand suddenly found home on Jeremy’s shoulder, apparently playing with one hand, but whatever, the round just started and the windows were blockaded from their last Carpenter still.

“Nah, Jer. Mr Reyes wouldn’t give you a big role if you were the worst. If you want I can stay after rehearsal tomorrow and walk home with you? Or, if you wanna get a headstart, you could always just practice your lines with me.”

Jeremy considered, feeling less helpless per Michael’s support, but shrugged casually. “Maybe, thanks, by the way.”

“No problem, oh fuck, also, I asked Jake to print out some notes for our chem test today and like
we talked and shit and he’s actually a cool guy.” Michael said, and Jeremy laughed dryly in his head.

“Oh, actually? What did he say?” asked Jeremy, glad that Michael was too immersed in the screen to notice his Cheshire grin.

The sun set before the game over screen appeared on Jeremy’s TV. It was probably after six thirty, but Michael wouldn’t be leaving until half past eight.

Their eyes red from staring unblinkingly at a screen for almost two hours, and hearts racing because holy shit, they finally beat their high score.

Enduring long, repetitive, gruelling battles against undead hordes that always ended with the same doomed fate every time was tiresome, but knowing they finally got past level forty-six on Der Riese? Worth it.

“I’m exhausted. Zombies is exhausting.” Jeremy groaned, letting his aching spine rest against the ledge of his bed. The overhanging comforter was soft against his neck, so he relaxed himself and snatched the bottle of Dr. Pepper from Michael’s side.

“Agreed. That shit was tense.” — Jeremy could agree, but he was still tense, trying to get used to Michael’s presence— “I’m a go for a bathroom break, you need anything from downstairs?” Michael asked, using Jeremy’s bedpost for aid in slowly standing up.

“Nah, I’m good.” Jeremy replied, mulling over Michael’s offer with a dismissive hand gesture.

“Thanks though.”

Michael left the room, and finally, Jeremy could catch a break. His head rolled back into the comforter, allowing the strain to finally unwind in his tight neck. Pleasure bloomed across his clavicle, and he sighed delightedly.

Okay, Michael was great and all, and they’re best friends, and hell, Jeremy loved seeing Michael again and having somebody so close to talk to after the past couple of days, but Saturday night was still a creeping memory.

And some things triggered that memory, like when Michael would sigh sinfully after being downed, or his grunts, or even whenever he touched Jeremy! It was electrifying! Euphoric! It kept Jeremy on his toes and he needed this break.

He couldn’t just stop those flashes of his memory from happening. He was grateful that they were a lot less frequent now, because fuck man, Monday morning, when Jeremy saw Michael in the hallway? He nearly walked into a support beam.

Jeremy was again, slowly getting used to Michael. He knew he wouldn’t have to go through this process if he’d just had some self-control that night, but he couldn’t change the past.

Speaking of Michael, he only took about four minutes before he was back, making rounds roving in Jeremy’s room. He tapped Jeremy’s Newton’s cradle with quiet awe before quickly putting the silver balls to a stop.
“So, whatchu wanna do now? I’m all zombies’d-out.” Michael asked, but a quick spark of intrigue that dawned across his features made it clear that he wouldn’t be waiting for Jeremy’s answer.

His interest was plucked into his aforementioned script set very formally on Jeremy’s desk. He shuffled a little closer to it, and Jeremy begged God for mercy, but how Michael’s curious eyebrow was raised in concern didn’t inspire confidence.

It was about maybe an inch in height, no taller than a teen novel, but the classic Courier-12 script typeface on the front reading ‘LYING LOVE’ made it undisputed what the booklet was for.

“Is it a romance play? You never told me that,” Michael muttered, grabbing the script— oh God, he has the script— and taking his same seat beside, but not too close to, Jeremy.

“O-oh, uhm well you never asked? It’s supposed to show in February for the Valentine’s’ Day weekend.” Jeremy responded, tips of his ears hot, and suddenly his hand was ruffling the back of his head nervously while Michael’s eyes were scrutinizing the script’s cover page.

“Huh.”

*What the fuck is ‘huh’ supposed to mean?*

“Nice, you gettin’ any action?” Michael chortled, and Jeremy’s red face huffed indignantly.

“No!” He squeaked. Jeremy tore away the script from Michael’s hands with a squawk.

Michael’s smug smirk confirmed his suspicions. He saw right through Jeremy.

“Yeaah boy! Rehearse some lines for me, hm?” said Michael, slapping away Jeremy’s infiltrating hand trying to tickle-attack him.

Jeremy ruffled the sheets of paper and scrunched his nose. If he’s honest, he really didn’t want to practice acting in front of Michael— knowing that while he was probably the most supportive audience Jeremy could ask for, he would also try to make him laugh. “Fine! Fine! But shouldn’t you know what it’s about first?”

“Sure. Tell me then, loverboy.” Michael cooed, and Jeremy’s cheeks apparently, could, and did, get pinker.

*Stupid Michael and his stupid nicknames.*

“It’s um, during the world war two era right? Set where this recently married woman’s husband is off to war since they’re like super-duper young and whatever.” Jeremy started, like normal, like his heart wasn’t beating out of his chest.

His eyes grazed over the synopsis of the story himself to double-check if he was getting this right.

“Her name is like, Amelie or something, she’s French and whatever and she’s trying to get a job because y’know, her husband is gone and she’s broke aye-eff.” Jeremy explained, and Michael nodded along, his hand offering a small piece of his Hershey’s bar, which Jeremy took to stuff in his mouth.

“N like, she goes out to do some auditions and shit and some womanizing CEO flirts with her.” he said, and making sure to not talk with food in his mouth (the noise both bothered Michael and it was just impolite), he stalled eating it. “So she decides she’s gonna like, play with his heart? Like entertain the idea of um, f–falling in love with him by going on dates or whatever.” Jeremy
swallowed down the chocolate.

The chocolate, going down, felt like a bigger piece than it actually was. It felt like Jeremy just swallowed down a sack of rocks, suddenly flustered because of talking about love with Michael present.

“But she actually starts to love him? And he definitely noticed, like he defo knew she was just playing until she isn’t. They go on a couple dates n’then like, the girl realizes she’s actually falling for him which is bad right?”

It’s kind of gross, assuming that this draft-exempt CEO was probably in his late-thirties and the protagonist was probably some young and dumb ingénue just trying to make some coin. Big age gaps like that have always made Jeremy uneasy, but it was a play, and probably wasn’t based off a true story.

So he only grimaced slightly before continuing with his sphiel— which sounded more like gossip at this point— per an encouraging hum from Michael.

“Act one ends with a moral dilemma for the protagonist after the CEO thing becomes like, an actual thing, that she likes.”

“She has that job as the CEO’s secretary, but she also has her husband, who the audience learns that she’s not actually in love with.” explained Jeremy, and instead of using vague and extreme hand gestures like he normally would when ranting, his hands were fidgeting with one another nervously in his lap.

Jeremy sat with his legs criss-crossed, small and reserved. “So it’s called ‘lying love’ because she’s in a loveless marriage, and ‘cos she didn’t want to fall in love with CEO-man.”

Michael nodded, but his eyes looked distant. Jeremy wondered if he was even paying attention anymore.

Was this interesting? Probably not. With his stutter and lack of vocabulary, he’s not really the best at giving good synopses, which was apparent after those tens of times where Jeremy tried explaining movies plots to Michael. He should probably just read from the description given on the screenplay, but that was boring.

“Um, well, the affair continues, and at the end her husband comes home. I don’t really know what happens exactly, since I’m only given my lines, but it ends with her divorcing her husband, leaving the company, and starting her own business.” Jeremy finished, and those two beads of sweat sliding down his nape were prime indicators of how timid and brittle he felt right now.

“Mmn, cool! So who’re you playin’?” asked Michael, and Jeremy heaved a sigh of relief. Glad he wasn’t bored out, and hey, he actually sounded a little excited about this, but that’s besides the point.

“Oh– oh right, yeah um, I play the CEO.”

Red burgeoned across his cheeks, and it didn’t help when Michael spluttered out a laugh and wheezed at him.

“Shut up, that’s exactly why I’m worried about the part!” Jeremy defended. Thanks Michael, you beautiful jerk, now Jeremy’s just a little more self-conscious and a tenfold more anxious. It’s like that talk earlier about being perfectly capable for the role meant nothing anymore.
Michael calmed down and rolled his eyes. “No, I’m not saying you’re not gonna do amazing, ’cause you are. It’s just funny. My boy’s finally getting some action.”

Jeremy’s heart rate increased more than he’d like to admit after Michael called him ‘his boy’ (plus the indecent amount of flattery) but he knew better than to think too much about it.

He swallowed down his heart and buried his head into the script, knowing that how hot his face was right now was probably suspicious enough to warrant some questions.

“Seriously though, d’you kiss her or anything? I’m curious.” Michael insisted, his hand massaging into Jeremy’s shoulder. The stim was definitely luring him into a false sense of security.

Either way, Jeremy complied flusteredly.

“Yes! I do, and ugh, I’m dreading it, Michael! Can— can I just read out my lines now?” Jeremy whined, and Michael’s easy, sympathetic nod was enough mercy for him. He didn’t care that he’d basically fallen right into Michael’s trap, reading lines was a ten times better than freaking out about that stupid kiss he’d have to do.

“Hey, it’s alright. You’ll be fine, Jeremy.” Michael muttered, his fingers easing into the soft skin between Jeremy’s shoulder and neck. He purred incidentally with an unwinding knot. “D’you want me to do your cues?”

Jeremy nodded gratefully, quickly checking his phone for the time.

Six fifty-two, said the screen. Michael would be here for another hour, so it was inevitable. One way or the other, things would lead here, to Jeremy reading out his lines and having to practice acting in front of his crush just to fill the time.

After forty minutes of Jeremy’s surprisingly accurate voiceover of his lines (seriously, for a fifteen year old kid playing a crafty early-thirties business-man from the 1940’s in high-school theatre, his impression fit nicely), the clock read seven twenty.

He read down the latest page, harrumphed twice to clear his throat, then lowered his voice an octave for the next line. With noticing the next couple of lines and cues came some corroding nervousness, already starting to itch at him.

“I’d say you’d be surprised, Mishes Barre.” Jeremy said, slowly and furtively folding the script away into his chest while distracting Michael with a silly, forced wink.

They’d finished their ‘reading’ (though they skipped tons of lines and laughed too much for a dramatic play) up until almost the end of act one.

Michael only noticed anything different because of how the line Jeremy was supposed to be reading assertively thinned out into a mumble, his confident façade starting to tremble in resonance.

Michael flinched, cocking his brow in interest, then letting his curious fingers curl slowly around
the top of the script, trying to take a peak.

That’s when, oddly, Jeremy jumped back, a protective arm shielding it, a provoked squawk sounding from between his lips.

Nice job, Jeremy. In efforts to hide his imminent mortification event, he ended up bringing more attention to it. Great. Hopefully Michael would notice he didn’t want to talk about it and—

“What? What’s wrong?” Michael inquired, tilting his head at him.

It didn’t get better when Jeremy squeaked out a “Nothing.” in response. If anything, it only made Michael more curious.

Yup. Predictable, because this happened a lot. If there’s one thing was notorious for, it’s that he just can’t lie— or at least, he could only lie about some particular things— and whenever he was nervous? He’d end up spluttering out honesty like oil out a dying car.

Any attempts at concealing himself were futile, and Michael especially, saw right through them. “Uh-huh.” he mused, trying to peel back the top of the pages, and with Jeremy’s jumpy motion of protectively hunching over the booklet, he had what he was looking for.

“Something’s up?” Michael asked, but it sounded more like a statement than a question. “Did the script grow teeth and you’re just protecting me from getting bit?”

Jeremy shook his head and scooted a little farther away from Michael. “N–no, it’s just well—”

Really, Jeremy couldn’t lie for shit. He didn’t even know why he tried hiding it in the first place. He was an anxious wreck, and with time passing and tension in the air thickening, his thoughts could only get louder and more explicitly detailed.

“I’m really nervous about this kissing scene and f–fucking things up so I didn’t really want to think about it or address it and I wanted to hide it from you so you wouldn’t make fun of me and I know you’d just be joking but I’m like, terrified.” babbled Jeremy.

For someone who hadn’t moved in the last couple of hours, Jeremy’s heart was beating out of his chest, and his mouth was moving too fast. He shouldn’t be talking to Michael about this, hell, he shouldn’t even be overthinking the kiss so much to begin with, but here he was.

Michael blinked, while Jeremy tucked his legs in closer towards his body in the thick air, honestly deliberating curling up into the fetal position until Michael left.

“Oh, Jeremy. What’re you honestly scared about? It’s a stage kiss, it’s not like you’re dating her.” consoled Michael, but frankly, Jeremy just took it as mockery. It was something silly to get so worked up over, his anxiety told him so. Still, he couldn’t stop worrying about it.

He didn’t understand how Mr Reyes thought he was capable enough for this part. Or maybe he’d just wanted to get Jeremy out of his comfort zone, which he’s definitely doing, to an extreme degree.

Maybe he just accidentally flipped the names ‘Jake’ with ‘Jeremy’. It’d be an easy mistake, they both start with J. Jeremy hoped that when he got to rehearsal tomorrow, this role placement thing was just one big mistake, and he was actually supposed to be the tree.

“Well if I went into what I was scared about, we’d be here all night.” Jeremy seethed, but the anger diffused almost instantly. Michael’s long sigh carried enough disappointment for a lifetime, and it
wasn’t even that heavy.

Jeremy’s lip line cracked into a slight frown. Just hearing any disappointment from Michael weighted on him.

“I mean it, Micah. I’m pretty sure my last k–kiss was from my mom in the summer of eighth grade.” he huffed, using some defensive and sharp tones to cover how humiliated he was.

His face was still red, so really, none of his efforts really mattered. “And that was on my forehead! I just, I don’t know how to kiss. My kiss game? Weak.” Jeremy sighed.

Michael’s kissed people before, so he doesn’t understand. For someone who was supposedly ‘gay as fuck’, he’s had a lot more girlfriends or flings under his belt than Jeremy—who was still clinging to the idea that he was straight—has, or could ever have. Realistically the number would probably never change.

“You’ll be fine, Jer, you’ll have tons of time to up your kiss game before the show opens. I’m sure your hand wouldn’t mind to be a practice dummy, either.” Michael commented, and that was the truth.

It made Jeremy smile, because the way Michael said it made him sound half as pathetic as he actually was.

Still, Jeremy was fixed on the actual issue enough to acknowledge that out loud. “Oh shut up, you can’t even talk. You’ve kissed before, peasants like me have not.” Jeremy slugged Michael in his arm.

“I guess, but seriously, what could go wrong? You accidentally kiss with the wrong orifice?” Michael asked.

But Jeremy’s anxiety just didn’t quit. He sighed, then shrugged his shoulders, then cracked his knuckles, trying to ease how taut his joints were. Dejectedly, he resorted to gnawing on his lips, which were already marbled pale pink and red.

“No, no, I’m just scared of humiliation. You know, I’m not a Jake Dillinger, who really, should be playing the CEO, and I’m just worried that this girl— I think her name is Madison or Madeline? Some French chick— will be like, disappointed. You know how the French are.” explained Jeremy.

His eyes turned downcast, and he reluctantly bit into one of their last donuts; his lips were bitten enough, and stung whenever he rolled his tongue across.

“Oh, God,” Jeremy winced. “and what if I’m shit at it? What if I slobber all over her in front of the audience?”

Jeremy was frustrated. That’s become a well known fact between them at this point. By the way he’s trying to stuff his hands in his pockets to avoid chewing on his fingernails, or by his hushed, puffed-out voice, or how his toes were wiggling underneath his socks, or how he’s hunched over to an abnormal degree; it’s a cemented truth.

“Wait, Michael,” Jeremy started, and even though he’s physically already acknowledged it, the realization dawned on him. “You’ve kissed people before, right?”

Michael, even though he was a board certified loser during freshman year, switched between girlfriends left and right.
The streak started in eighth grade, but either way, Michael walked into the tenth grade with a rainbow patch proudly donned on his left shoulder (which Jeremy was very aware of).

So he didn’t really talk about it anymore. Jeremy assumed it’d just been a confusing time for him; but he’d long admired (and envied) how Michael could pick up girls (whether that be online or in real life) with ease.

Apparently to Michael, it was because he played hard-to-get. Ironic, wasn’t it? All that time, there was a reason he was hard to get.

“Yes, I guess. I don’t really see how that’s relevant right now.” shrugged Michael.

Jeremy didn’t know how his hand apparently reached out of his pocket and back into his hair off his watch, but it has. Maybe it’s some sort of stim he just resorted to absent-mindedly.

Either way, it helps, a lot. It’s a clear indicator that he’s nervous, but whatever, Michael probably already knew that anyway.

“We’re not twins, I can’t just play him in your place.”

“Um, well, tell me? Like, give me tips?” Jeremy suggested, his voice kind of frail and small by now. “What do I do?”

Michael laughed, but it echoed dry and wrung-out, so Jeremy shrunk farther into his knees. “I seriously don’t know how to answer that. Don’t shove your tongue down her throat? I dunno.”

Michael’s eyes moved to Jeremy’s. They were warm, and kind, and well-intended, and Jeremy knew that.

Just Michael’s comfort aside, the reality that he’d have to kiss some girl in front of the entire production was still… nerve-racking.

“It’s sort of a learn-by-experience thing.”— and before Jeremy could squawk about how that’s unfair —“A rigged system, I know.” Michael explained.

“I mean my first like, actual kiss was awful. I’m just lucky that she didn’t know anything either. So I just I see where you’re coming from.”

That didn’t help.

Jeremy sighed resignedly. He pressed his back against the ledge of the bed, trying to swallow down this fear, trying to forget about all the ways it could go wrong.

Michael was trying to downsize it because he too knows what it’s like. It was probably terrifying for him, too.

“Ugh,” Jeremy groaned. “is there a WikiHow page on how to do this? I need to practice.”

His other hand went to his phone, tapping with just his one thumb for that stupid tutorial. Unfortunately, all that came up was some blogs about how to French kiss.

Nope. This is a stage kiss. But he bookmarked two of the French kissing ones for later use.

In the dark background, off his backlit phone screen, Michael shuffled into view, and took a seat across from him.
“Uhm, Michael?” Jeremy asked, setting his phone on his lap. He didn’t know why a blush was starting to creep up his neck, but it definitely was.

Maybe because Michael was kind of… staring, at him, intently.

“This is gonna sound weird,” he started— and oh boy, that’s not a good way to start off a sentence, Michael— “but I can teach you, if you want.”

Jeremy froze into place for seconds that felt like forever, processing information like a broken down, blue-screened computer. Confused, kind of shocked, and definitely skeptical.

He didn’t know what emotion it was that overtook and submerged him, but it was loud and unnerving.

Much like the silence in the room that followed.

Michael dropped his gaze away and tightened his already clenched fists. “Oh, alright. Sorry then, I didn’t mean to make it weir—”

“Wait! What do you mean?” asked Jeremy, and he knew, very well, that drawing attention to this would probably just make the air in the room more awkward. They should just move on to act two and forget about this—

Michael sighed “Alright, Jer, you don’t have to rub it in. I was just making a suggestion.”

Michael’s voice was… weird. Deprived of his usual kick, almost sad, like that night, seeing him after his fight with his dad. It broke Jeremy.

“And I’m seriously considering this suggestion, Michael! If it’ll help me out, then just say it already! What do you mean? Teach me how?” Jeremy huffed, annoyed and frustrated and curious and flustered and shaking from how fucking nervous he was. A little scared too, Michael hardly ever sounded so beaten up.

And since Michael looked apparently uncomfortable with any eye contact right now, Jeremy tore his own head away and became very interested with the irregular pattern of his hardwood floor.

“I mean just practicing. With me. Which is weird, and I realize that now. Let’s just read out act two, alright?” Michael commanded, snatching the script away from Jeremy and snapping it straight.

Jeremy noticed what looked like the faintest of red on his cheeks. Something Michael never had. He tried not to overthink it, making feeble attempts to turn up the volume knob of his voice of reason.

But Jeremy’s stomach was still in a twist, he was so dizzy and winded that he didn’t have time to think about Michael blushing right now. There was a fight, in his head, but in all honesty, he couldn’t call it much of a fight.

Two sides, one vehemently for the notion, the other against. The words yes, yes, yes, let’s do it clashed against some reasoning telling him this was wrong, that this was ridiculous, that it’d be just downright repulsive exploitation of Michael’s good heart.

But apparently not repulsive enough.

Because again, and he's already told you, it wasn’t really much of a fight.
It wouldn’t even matter, which voice Jeremy sided with in this hypothetical end. Because his brain was too busy short-circuiting, and it didn’t have time to think or restart or even imagine the word ‘no’ before his lips moved on their own.

It’s a terrible idea. It’s going to kill Jeremy. He wouldn’t survive it and he knew that.

But God, he’s been pining after Michael that some days, it hurts to breathe— what if this was his only shot? What if he’ll never get this chance again?

“Practice? C—could we? I’m really worried I’ll be bad at it.” he blurted, and Michael, who apparently was steadily reading through the first couple of pages of the second act, quirked his head at him quizzically.

He cocked his eyebrow, his head tilted so much that it apparently was on on a different axis than the Earth. Though honestly, the scariest part was the scrutinizing look in his eyes.

“You sure?” asked Michael, adding a complimentary chortle to ease the tension in the room. Jeremy appreciated the sentiment.

But Michael made it sound casual and simple, he made that question sound like Jeremy was just asking to borrow his gaming console or for help on some tough math questions.

He wished it was that simple in his head.

Jeremy wasn’t sure when of his lovesick stupidity started leaking out into his words, but if he had to guess, it was when he asked Michael to come over today. Or honestly, when he walked into History class on that first day of sophomore year.

Michael’s smug glances swallowed him whole and right now, there was too much anxiety to keep track of that he just couldn’t push down the blush.

He knew this was a bad idea, fuck, not just bad, this was a terrifying idea, to ask Michael to ‘practice kissing’. What a fucking idiot! Who else can land himself in such compromising situations? It’s like swerving into oncoming traffic by choice. Does Jeremy have a death wish?

Yes. Apparently. Because sometimes, he wanted to kiss Michael so much that he could barely breathe, and that meant a lot more to Jeremy than

“Oh, yeah, well, sure. Of course, Jer.” said Michael.

But he was definitely nervous too. His thumb was notably snuck into the cusp of his tight fist, and he seemed like he finally understood the gravity and how nervous Jeremy was.

It’s weird, okay? Probably not as weird as some of the other stuff they’ve done, but it’s still weird and should best friends do this for eachother?

But whatever Michael was thinking right now, Jeremy definitely had it worst. He didn’t think he’s ever felt so anxious before, and honestly, he isn’t even sure he was breathing anymore. It’s not like he could hear his breathing, or discern if he was speaking or not, all he could hear was the drum of his heart loud in his ears.

Suddenly, Michael sucked in a breath, then let it out with a hysterical laugh and shook his airborne hands.

And just as Jeremy’s heart hit the floor, Michael readjusted himself and beamed at Jeremy.
“Alright, okay, sorry. Froze up for a second there.” Michael wheezed, and while Michael could apparently shrug off the nerves, Jeremy could not. He was still sitting aghast, his eyes growing wider with terror when Michael scooted closer to him.

Apparently, it was only after Michael’s hand made contact with the soft spot between Jeremy’s jaw and ear that Michael noticed how scared he looked.

“Hey, Jer,” Michael murmured, his voice sounding too comforting, too delicate and sweet—but Jeremy adored it, leaning into his touch. “we don’t have to, I just figured that it’d be… easier, to have some experience under your belt.” he said, but he knew, it didn’t look like Jeremy was phased at all.

Michael’s eyebrows furrowed. “Look at me.”

Gallantly, Jeremy swallowed, and flitted his eyes obediently into Michael’s, which were limpid, glassesless (apparently that made him hotter, cool, whatever) and clear.

“Hey.” Jeremy breathed, nerved and uncomfortable. Michael was leaned into him, his knees bent while Jeremy still sat criss-crossed and reserved. His hands, previously tucked onto his lap, pressed either side of him, and dug at the wood floor, while he grinded down on his teeth.

Michael chuckled. It was sweet, deep, and husky—maybe it sounded like that and resonated with him so well because they’re sitting so close together. Either way, it didn’t fucking help his case.

Jeremy lightly shook his head and gulped down, hoping his heart would fall down the hatch with the smallest smidge of saliva he was making, but that made no difference either. Time was ticking so fast right now, and beyond he and Michael’s little bubble, it seemed nothing was real. It was just, a blur of colours and muddled shapes.

Michael’s scalding hand drifted from the ledge of Jeremy’s jaw down towards his chin tenderly. Maybe he was hyperventilating at this point. Jeremy hoped Michael thought he always hyperventilated when fake-kissing his best friends of eleven years.

Because Jeremy shouldn’t be this close to Michael, and he shouldn’t want to be closer. Just… a little closer.

Jeremy accidentally whimpered, so he made sure to rot in some self-loathing later. He was lucky that he didn’t accidentally let Michael’s name slip between his lips.

Keeping his eyes open was so hard, he wanted to be here, he so wanted to be here, but he needed to not be here. He needed to be anywhere but here. This will kill of him, all those times they shotgunned could ever prepare for being so close.

“You’re okay, alright? It’s me, Michael, your best friend.”—That’s why I’m freaking out—

“We’re in your bedroom and, well, if you don’t want to do this, that’s alright. So Jeremy, are you okay with this? This doesn’t mean anything.” Michael prefaced, and even though he flinched at those last words, Jeremy nodded. He had to nod, so he forced himself to.

“Yeah—yeah, um, no homo.” Jeremy chuckled, but even light-hearted, oxymoronic comments didn’t help his paroxysm of screaming emotions and hormones.

Michael leaned in, and Jeremy held his breath in anticipation, trying, trying so hard to prepare for what could be the worst and best moment of his life, for hell, what could be the death of Jeremy Heere—
Until Michael’s face twisted, and he started chortling, his tight lip-line trying to contain a giggle-fit. Hushed breaths prespired on Jeremy’s skin, and the realization that this was all a set-up broke his heart in half.

Why… why would Michael do this? What type of sick, twisted game was he trying to play here?

Mortification spread across Jeremy’s features without him realizing it; his stomach dropping and eyes widening with dread. He felt like he just flung himself off some cliff, like he was a frayed wire, broken and empty and beyond repair.

Really, did he really fall for Michael’s tricks again? Did he really let himself be vulnerable enough to let this happen?

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! You—you just looked so focused. So we’ll um, we can try again later?” Michael taunted, and Jeremy didn’t know if the breath he expelled came from relief, or just the fact that he would’ve suffocated otherwise.

Still, his face fell sadly, disappointed because apparently his concentrated facial expression ruined what was probably his one chance at kissing his crush. Michael would probably never revisit this, just to avoid anymore awkwardness.

But Jeremy didn’t speak. How could he, after that? Michael looked like he was just ready to fall back, to resign and go back to playing zombies for the next fifteen minutes, and Jeremy would have to be, too.

He shouldn’t have gotten his hopes up in the first place. So he sighed dejectedly, and took probably his last look at Michael from this close a distance.

Something stirring in Jeremy was loud; a blitz of heart palpitations with a scenic view of these two handsome black-brown eyes staring into his own. Something confused, and longing, and needy.

Until those eyes closed, and Michael’s head tilted up, and holy fucking shit he’s actually kissing me.

Jeremy thought they were just going to go back to Xbox and early 2000’s games, Jeremy thought that this interaction would just turn into a forgotten memory by tomorrow, or something they’d laugh at in years time.

Jeremy didn’t think that this kissing thing was still going to ever happen until Michael’s lips were gently pressed against his own— and he was back to being a deer in headlights, frozen in shock and bubbling with yes.

He exhaled the breath he’d apparently been holding for minutes through his nose, murmured his surprise into the kiss, and wispily fluttered his eyes shut.

Michael’s mouth was tender and sweet. He didn’t attack Jeremy, he didn’t try to go too deep, or lick into Jeremy’s mouth like some bloodthirsty hawk sucking the life out of their prey, but he also wasn’t too soft against him, he didn’t just graze Jeremy’s lip; he made sure they were connected, that it was just the right amount of contact.

Somehow, Jeremy was still hungry for more, like he wanted to be swallowed by this feeling, like he wanted this loud, happy buzz in his throat to get louder, and louder, until it devoured him whole, until he was finally convinced that this was real.

He stuffed that thought down. This was enough.
Jeremy wasn’t going to call it perfect, objectively. He’s biased, so sure, for him— besides the fact that it didn’t matter and wasn’t real— this kiss was fucking perfect.

Of course, Jeremy did have a really bony nose. He could feel that pressing into Michael’s cheek— he couldn’t imagine that was comfortable—, and both their lips were mildly chapped, and he also couldn’t move like, any of his limbs, which made this whole encounter more one-sided than he’d like to admit.

Michael eased off Jeremy’s tingling lips and opened his eyes, looking pleased with himself.

But Jeremy was still. His lip stung a little, they were so bitten that just Michael’s mouth on his drew out some pain. Of course, that’s not what he was thinking about at all. His mind was clamoring so loudly that he couldn’t even hear himself anymore. He just sat there, unmoving and breathless.

Like Michael was the Dementor who’d just sucked the breath right out of him.

Michael’s hand slid back and forth in his vision, and Jeremy knew that, subconsciously. He saw his arm waving like a windshield wiper, and he saw Michael’s lips moving, yes, but did he really? His spine was still as straight as a ruler, and his hands were sitting limply on his lap.

It wasn’t busting him out of his reverie like it should. Jeremy was just, put on pause, with a lost look in his blue eyes.

“Uh, Jeremy?” Michael prodded, and Jeremy snapped back into conscience like he’d hit the play button on some ‘HeereTV’ remote.

Jeremy couldn’t, and didn’t want to, fathom how red he must be right now. He can’t even believe what’d happened now, seconds, maybe even minutes after.

Michael kissed you. Some voice reminded him, and for one singular, heavensent second, he felt on top of the world. So euphoric and giddy that nothing could ruin this for him.

and he only did it to save your ass from embarrassment. Another said, like Jeremy wasn’t painfully aware and purposefully trying not to think about it.

It’s weird that it was the first thing Jeremy said after his first kiss, but he muttered a soft, ‘thank you’ to Michael, dipping his head down to hide the pink on his cheeks.

He wished he could thank him a million times, or shower him with more kisses to show his gratitude, but alas, this is just something fake. Fantastical. Something that Michael did because they’re friends and he wanted to help out. Not real. Not something Jeremy should be craving again.

Just something as tedious as math homework, something Michael was obligated to do for Jeremy because he pities him, probably.

“I mean, you’ll have to learn how to actually kiss, so we’ll have to do that a few more times, but uh, that’s enough kissing for me today.” he, Michael, chuckled. Jeremy didn’t know what ‘actual kissing’ meant, but he was too busy feeling like he was given the Midas touch when Michael said ‘a few more times’.

So there’d be more.

Jeremy let out a dry chortle just so he wouldn’t look so spacey, but it was delayed and weak.
He tried to spring some livelihood into his ghosty body— knowing Michael’s pinched eyebrows meant he was skeptical about his mental stability— but Jeremy’s mad hand gestures jutted out like a robot instead of moving fluidly, like a human’s would. So it didn’t inspire much confidence.

“Haha, yeah. Uhm, seriously though, I- I uhm, I really appreciate you ha–helping me out here.” said Jeremy shakily, nodding his head a little too profusely as if he was programmed to do so.

Some flustered, hot feeling seeped deeper into his blood, angry, and leaking with shame and guilt because he’s really fucking himself over here, and he shouldn’t have said yes. Jeremy made a note to slap himself later, then quietly wondered whether or not this would change anything between them.

But yet again, it’s Michael. Michael didn’t change. Their friendship was a constant. A truth in both their lives. A life-long spell, like marriage, just less gay. Kissing your best friend was normal for them if it was for practice, if it wasn’t real.

Even when someone wished it was, this was normal. Or at least, normal enough. They were that close, they could do this and it didn’t have to be weird.

“You gonna be okay there?” Michael asked, and even though his voice was smug, like always, there was definitely some undertones of actual worry bleeding through.

So Jeremy nodded, because he can’t cement lies with the words ‘yes’ or ‘I’m fine’. He’s lucky Michael hasn’t found that out yet. The kid knows almost everything else there is to know about him, adding to that: the taste of Jeremy’s probably-coppery lips.

“Just um, t–that was a little unexpected. I’m good, great, actually!” Jeremy mustered breathily; hating himself for his nervous tendencies.

“Don’t chu worry, ‘bout a thing.” he coughed out his sing-songy voice, and even though it was broken and strained, Michael’s resulting grin was enough to unwind the stress in Jeremy’s neck, and apparently dissolve some thickness in the room.

They were separate now, living in their own bubbles, but still looking straight at each other. Some of Jeremy’s grated nerves seemed to migrate into the musty air between them. He didn’t know how he’d

Michael ducked away to check the time. The small bout of shock dawning across his phone-lit face read that he didn’t realize it was so late already.

Jeremy peeked over to see the screen. Seven fifty-two, with four unread texts from Ms Langit. Jeremy recently (today, but he’s still proud that he remembered it hours later) found out her maiden name.

“Oh, fuck. Mom wants me home, ugh.” Michael groaned, and then, after further investigation into her messages: “Huh, she’s cooking tonight, there’s an incentive.”

Jeremy perked up his ears, kind of nerve-racked and definitely still shaking, but needing to prove that he was functional. So, in attempts to normalize the air, he’d make the comments he usually would, like now, one about loving Ms Langit’s cooking. “Bring some leftovers to school tomorrow?” he peeped.

Michael chuckled, stuffing his phone in his pocket. “Sure. But I should go now. You know how she gets.”
Jeremy did. He slugged his shoulders in relief with a nod, but his nerves were still too frazzled and raw to show it.

For anyone who’s new to Jeremy’s jinxed sitcom of a life, the protagonist, Jeremy Heere, is basically renown for making regrettable decisions in his times of panic. The problem is well, he panics, a lot. He’s panicking right now, badly.

So before Michael went to sit up and grab his things, Jeremy made the impulsive choice to swing over and peck him.

Anyone who’s watched this sitcom for more than one episode knows that well, he has a big fucking crush on Michael Mell.

So one quiet, and quick, and simple kiss goodbye meant a lot more than it should. Hell, their lips probably only grazed one another, but that was enough for Jeremy. He could say that he kissed Michael Mell.

Michael might’ve lost his cool. He might not of. Jeremy had no clue by how inscrutable Michael’s face turned out to look by the time he leaned off him.

Jeremy’s stomach dropped, and trepidation that he just made a big mistake set in. He was definitely feeling… something, maybe distress.

But Michael snapped back. He always snaps back. His shoulders went from frozen to bouncy, and he smiled conceitedly at Jeremy.

“You’ll definitely have to make that more intense, but good for a first time.” Michael commented with a wink, so smug and sly, like there wasn’t a red glow on his face, like he wasn’t surprised that Jeremy kissed him.

Either way, he pulled off making Jeremy blush too, so it’s not like he failed with his charms. Jeremy didn’t remember a time anymore where his face felt cool, or fuck, even room-temperature.

Michael was standing up, and Jeremy figured it’d be wise to show him the door, even though he could probably navigate the Heere household better than Jeremy. Really, anything for a few more seconds with him, this felt like such an abrupt thing to leave off of.

Though his limbs didn’t seem to have any feeling and moved limply on their own, he still managed to climb down the stairs behind Michael and meet him at the door, where Michael extended his fist for another rendition of their handshake peace treaty from across the other side of the threshold.

Jeremy smirked, kicking his ankle against Michael’s. Of course, he was in such a state of shock still that he mostly rode as a passenger in his own body. Not nearly thinking out his movements and simply going through the motions.

“Hey Michael?” His lips said through his smile, and even if Jeremy wasn’t consciously moving them, he still wanted to say this. Well, he sort of… needed, some clarification.

Michael perked his head up. “I, I um, I s-seriously wanted to thank you for erm. For doing that for me. The… you, you know.” stammered Jeremy. “I don’t know where I’d be without’cha.”

But Michael nodded, his grin widening, like this was the most normal thing that all best friends do. Should he be normalising this?

They already get enough gay comments, they already hold hands and hug and share secrets and
sometimes even cry together. What happens when they completely blur that line between romantic and platonic?

Jeremy didn’t know. He kind of wanted to find out.

“Probably crash and burn, but don’t sweat it, alright? It’s no problem. I know you’re hella nervous for this play, and if there’s some way I can help out then yeah. ‘Course I will.” Michael consoled, his hand stretching down Jeremy’s shoulder.

“We’re close, Jer. It, It doesn’t mean anything, so I don’t have a problem with it.”

Jeremy wasn’t sure if this was supposed to make him feel better anymore. The pang in his heart said otherwise. But of course, Michael didn’t know that.

He nodded through the sting. Somehow, the skin on his shoulder sizzled when Michael’s hand drifted off it. “Yeah, of course.”

“Rad, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Michael said, and with Jeremy’s hum of goodbye, the door shut.

At least Jeremy had some breathing room. Some Michael-free house where he could think again. God, Michael, what was Jeremy supposed to do about him?

Jeremy’s going to go to stuff his face in his pillow now, and think on whatever the fuck just happened.

Michael texted him later that night about what happened at his house.

It was expected. Late night, self-conscious texts from Michael are a signature of his, to be fair.

Michael never seemed to get worked up in the moment, it was always at the end of the day where he repented on his actions, in the safety of his bed. Jeremy couldn’t blame him, somedays he wished he could do the same.

But nah, Jeremy’s anxiety made sure that he thought about everything as it came to him. All freak-outs were to be displayed in public.

Either way, Jeremy was doing his boring nightly ritual of staring up at the ceiling and being way too jumpy whenever his house creaked, that when his phone, stationed beside him, awoke with a flare of light, he instantly checked it.

“michael mellon ; hey i know it’s like, Iam & ur maybe asleep but probably not coz ur jeremy heere but i just wanna make sure Today at 1:34”

“michael mellon ; that kissing stuff, is it okay with you? i’m being consumed with Self Doubt™ Today at 1:34”
Jeremy loomed over his phone for minutes, the ‘Read’ indicator probably scaring Michael.

He stood there, conjuring up drafts and typing out apologies, knowing it’d be right to turn it down, to stop this before he crashed and burned.

He was presented an exit. Just saying yes would’ve saved him, because this would be his doom, this would light the first spark to a wildfire of bad ideas and bad choices, to some unquenchable desire consumed by greed and lust. If he’d said yes, there’d be no stopping that inferno. Not even an ocean-full of water could stop his thirst for more.

But damn it if Jeremy wasn’t the one holding that first match.

He erased his drafts, and plunged himself into the first burn.

“Jeremy queere ; No way man, I’m grateful actually, just a long day ig. Sorry for worrying you lmao. Today at 1:37”

“Jeremy queere ; What’s some kissing between friends? haha Today at 1:37”

Hell, who was he kidding? Jeremy couldn’t even save himself. It’s like he needed Michael to save him from the burning building he lit.

“Michael mellon ; ok ok, i just wanted to make sure ur cool w/ that type of stuff. Today at 1:37”

Oh Michael, if only if he knew. Maybe then he’d stop him, maybe then he’d snuff out this fire before it turned into the holocaust it’d become.

Jeremy was anything but cool with this type of stuff. Why? Because he wanted more. So he stood there, watching that small, starting hearth spark out into a blaze. He’d be here, right here, he’d let himself get swallowed by the heat, he’d never let himself get held accountable for his own death.

He’d get what he wanted, he just didn’t know at what cost.

Chapter End Notes

sorry if the fake kissing thing is something you don't like? i planned this since the beginning and i really wanted to incorporate it earlier i just couldn't find the opportunity haha
Jeremy taking a step back, knew that soon, his luck would run out.

That he was completely fucked.

That eventually, those hungry flames would catch up to him, devour him, and leave nothing but ash behind.

It was a hard reality to deal with. He didn’t know what he’d do when it finally happened, when he finally broke, but apparently, he was still the one throwing the gasoline, he was the one with a death wish.

Jeremy couldn’t understand what started all of this, or more specifically, he couldn’t decide when this crush— he only called it that still because referring to Michael as a ‘someone I’m in-love with’ was too long a title— started.

How he ended up kissing, but not really kissing that crush, how he started a journal just to keep himself in line, how he melted just at the sight of those crush’s brown eyes, how he deviated and sexualized that stupid, sacrilege image of his crush, or just, how it all happened.

It could’ve started anywhere, when these feelings started surfacing. It could’ve been back at the mall after a long first week of school, it could’ve been crying into his arms the next weekend or babysitting his niece, it could’ve been shotgunning or finding that pride patch in his drawer, or it could’ve been before all that.

It could’ve been in the summer, how Jeremy missed him and longed to talk with him again, or during freshman year, those soft pangs of jealousy whenever he started dating someone, it could’ve been those tingles whenever he made a racy comment, or any of the times that he calmed Jeremy down from his panic attacks.

If he had to take a guess though, it was the second period on his first day back. Sophomore year, and Jeremy had been just as anxious as he thought he’d be. Scared of seniors, cowering from smoking deadbeats, sad that his mother wasn’t driving him anymore, and nervously scooting between people in the halls; exhausted.

Jeremy was pretty sure that seeing Michael that day, all of his changes on the outside, knowing he
was still the same on the inside, he was pretty sure that *that* was the first spark.

The moment of capture that lead to weeks of torture. A torture he was okay enduring, because hey, staying friends with Michael was just more important.

Maybe Jeremy didn’t know it then, maybe he just thought that slow-burning ember inside was just from jealousy or indignancy, maybe he was under the impression that it’d go away.

But it didn’t. He never used to blush around Michael, and it’s October now, and almost everytime he talked to him his face went pink.

And if he told his sixth grade self that his first kiss would be a boy, let alone Michael? He’d slap himself.

But he was still here, in spinning cycle of two parts heart-wrenching, unrequited love and one part regret. The irrational side of him told him that he should’ve stopped this before it got out of control, that he should’ve done *something* to stop his crush on Michael when it first started acting up.

Like every argument, there was more than just one side. There’s another, more rational voice too, one that didn’t make him feel as awful. Saying hey, look, listen, you only realized that he liked Michael a month ago (if he liked him longer, which he wasn’t sure), and he did try to stop himself with the journal and those rules. Just… nothing worked.

Of course, he knew that he shouldn’t of dug himself deeper into the rabbithole, which, he’s done, on several occasions. With the shotgunning and the cute nicknames and the flattery, the close-knit embraces and the… photos, and now this fake-kissing thing.

Seriously, this much counterproductiveness is unhealthy. Did he want to die or not?

Well, apparently he did. The only reason he’s thinking about all of this is because yes, he was correctly placed in the role of that womanizing CEO, and he’s still doing the stage-kissing-pact-thing with Michael.

Now they were back in his basement, bundled up on one of his couches together. Like some lovey-dovey couple, with a movie playing on the screen behind them.

Jeremy didn’t know what movie it was. It could’ve been porn and he’d be completely oblivious, because it’s just noise outside of their little bubble.

Jeremy also still didn’t know how to feel about this pact. Irrespective of that loud, euphoric ardor of *yes* whenever Michael inched closer to him, he knew this was bad. He knew this was just using Michael’s good heart to get some high he craved. He knew he was sick for wanting this.

Sadly, it was hard to put his emotions aside for the greater good. Jeremy had the ‘*am I bad person*’ debate with himself yesterday after Michael left, and the answer was yeah, probably. But he just didn’t care.

He was painfully aware of how deep a grave he was digging, and he just didn’t care enough to put down the shovel. Call him selfish, call him greedy, but he couldn’t help it.

Sure. *IT HURTS*. Whenever Michael pushes onto him with that hungry verve in his eyes, or whenever he squeezes Jeremy’s hand tightly.

Yes. *IT HURTS*. When he says ‘It doesn’t mean anything’ or ‘It’s what best, best friends do for
each other’; and Jeremy has to agree.

Of course. *IT HURTS*. Knowing this is all fake, and that Michael *doesn’t* wish it wasn’t.

But maybe one more kiss will convince Jeremy that he does. Maybe asking for clarification one more time will make Michael confess. It was pathetic, and wistful, and utterly hopeless; but it’s the last thought he could cling onto. It’d all hurt too much otherwise.

“Iss this a passionate kiss? Or just like, a quickie?” Michael hummed, his eyes grazing down and reading the screenplay in his hands. The implication alone drove Jeremy mad, but he let out a demure, pained sigh, sucked in a breath, and softly whispered “Passionate.”

Michael’s eyebrow perked up at him, Jeremy regretted speaking.

“Oh, cool.” he muttered, furrowing his look back onto the script. Jeremy sighed in relief, but the air was still pretty tense. It’s inscrutable what Michael was thinking, it’s obvious what Jeremy was.

Jeremy’s absolutely scuffled nerves haven’t calmed down a smidge ever since Tuesday night. It’s Thursday. For the past couple of days, just the slightest unannounced touch on his shoulder had the capability of sending him into a coma. He’d been so jumpy and paranoid.

Michael looked up at him, his eyes veiny and red and his limbs lazy. He’d already smoked a joint before Jeremy came over, by himself on the accord that Jeremy had to go home eventually tonight and didn’t want to risk Mr Heere seeing him high.

Though, that tender look in Michael’s eyes was intoxicating, so he’d probably end up going home suspiciously dizzy anyway. “So, do you wanna work on that now or what?”

Okay. Jeremy was still jumpy and paranoid, honestly. It was hard not to be when Michael asked questions like *those*, and looked like *that*, with that stupidly hot smolder that apparently Jeremy couldn’t catch a break from.

Trying not to look stunned was admittedly, difficult. Before realizing that realistically, there was nothing wrong with Michael’s question, his body flung itself back into the toss pillow, like being a metre in proximity to Michael had burned his skin.

Then he realized that realistically, there was nothing wrong with Michael’s question. So he pretended like he didn’t just catapult himself across the room, and nodded his head.

“Oh, um. Sure.” Jeremy stammered, voice a little louder than he wanted it to be, and yep, he sounded so dumb. “We can do that.”

He’s lucky that Michael chose not to ask questions. He knew Michael has some, the knowing mirth in his eyes was just merciful.

“Great,”

*What’s that supposed to mean?*

It’s not like Jeremy had time to think about that though. Michael shuffled up to him to where their knees could touch, and that stole all of his attention.

Apparently, Michael could see the terror in his face though, because his own features softened from those devilishly indecent eyes to something more… sweet.
He tilted his head at him, and Jeremy, too honed in on his expression, didn’t realize Michael’s hand was reaching for his own until it curled around his palm and squeezed.

Fingers snaked into his, and even though Jeremy winced from the steadfast warmth on his cold hand, Michael’s left reached for his shoulder and soothed out the knots there. But considering the context, it just lured him into a false sense of security.

“Don’t worry. I’m not gonna like, swallow your face. Let’s um, let’s actually start with something more simple. You try. Kiss me.” Michael stated, like he didn’t just throw a brick at Jeremy’s head.

It’s so frustrating to him. Michael was so easily under the impression that just because of their eleven year rapport together, they were allowed to do tasks like kiss so simply and painlessly. Michael acted like this was just so normal, like a natural rite of passage for close friendships.

Well. It wasn’t. At least not to Jeremy. Did other people do this? He didn’t know what world Michael grew up in to think that kissing your best friend was okay under any circumstance, but it definitely wasn’t the same one Jeremy lived in. Ugh, the worst part is how even though that actuality hurts, it’s kind of a necessary evil. Michael wouldn’t do this otherwise.

Plus, disregarding his heart-wrenching crush on him, Jeremy was still really uneasy with kissing Madeline, even if it was just a stage kiss. He needed to know how… actual kisses, are supposed to work.

Jeremy didn’t know her and well, he’s glad Michael actually wants to help, even if it was through some alternative methods. Of course, it’s not the main reason he said yes to this, but hopefully practice makes perfect.

But, God, if this is all for nothing, he’ll be pissed. Keeping himself together was exhausting. He was teetering on the edge of combustion and here Michael was, pulling the strings, probably finding entertainment off of Jeremy’s meager attempts to hold himself stable.

He really did try to push down the recurring thought about ‘what if this was all real ’, but his efforts were futile. That fantasy was Jeremy’s last lifesource. So he’ll sit on it, and hope that after enough kisses, he’ll stop freaking out.

For now, he’s still in that freaking out stage of their pact. They’re apparently best friends who kiss each other for theatre practice now. That has to mean something, it should mean something, but it just doesn’t. Not to Michael.

Michael encroached just a little closer, and tapped Jeremy’s knee impatiently.

“Earth to Jeremy?”

Oh, yeah. He’s supposed to kiss him, and he just spent the last three minutes in a spaced-out coma. Cool. Really convincing him that there’s nothing wrong here, Jer.

Jeremy nodded his head profusely— maybe to mask his shaking bones— and sucked in a breath.

“Yes— okay. I can do that. But um, don’t laugh.”

They’re Jeremy’s last words, probably. Or at least, they felt like it, echoing off bare insulation that Michael called his basement ‘walls’. He heard Michael snort while he leaned in, but that was the last of any physical sound.

For the brief second that he pressed this lips onto Michael’s, Jeremy’s burned out heart seemed to
have stopped. It’s usual thrum just paused. Noise was just… absent. Like he’d gone deaf. His slammed-shut eyes made for some unconventional sensory deprivation sequence, where all Jeremy could focus on was Michael.

Sure, they’re supposed to do longer, more passionate kisses for practice, because that’s the type of stage-kiss they’re preparing for, but Jeremy’s tender peck was about as sweet as it was awkward.

And Jeremy made sure to make it awkward alright, at least for him, because he’s airborne, leaning halfway into Michael’s lap, and that’s making his muscles wobble from the strain alone, but Jeremy wouldn’t dare to make contact with any part of his body below the waist. His lips almost fell off Michael’s once or twice, but he gripped the couch cushion and kept himself steady.

He lifted himself off, fluttering his eyes open and almost ready to continue with his normal human life, before Michael Mell, living embodiment of ‘why are all the hot ones gay!’ chuckled, and froze Jeremy in his tracks.

Ahem, Jeremy specifically said don’t laugh, Michael.

But that wasn’t what stopped the room from moving. Michael’s chuckle didn’t sound like a mocking chuckle, hell it didn’t even sound like a Michael chuckle.

“Not like that, here let me try.” said Michael, winking at him for that one split second.

Then surged his spine up and hungrily pushed their lips back together. The world crashed down on his shoulders, the room went blurry, his mind fuzzy, his body tingling.

Fuck. Jeremy didn’t have the time to stop the surprised squeak that bubbled out of his throat. He fell back into the arm of the chesterfield with Michael’s weight resting on top of him.

Michael easily readjusted though, just so his limbs weren’t pressing down on Jeremy.

But, really, it’s not like Jeremy could feel anything except the heat in his lips anyways.

Jeremy swallowed his shock, trying to keep himself stifled and steady, but melting into his lips anyway. Of course, he couldn’t show Michael that he… liked this.

This was purely platonic, and the soft, pleased hum slipping out of his mouth was already enough incriminating noise.

Here’s the thing. It’d be weird kissing anyone ‘platonically’, and kissing Michael especially— hell, Jeremy loved that boy so much it hurt— was just taunting.

This shouldn’t feel so right, but it does. It felt too good, too good to be true, and it wasn’t true. Kissing Michael was like being given a taste of the unattainable. He’s so close, but completely out of reach.

Well. A taste is better than nothing.

Michael will always be out of reach. He’ll— these kisses, their tight-knit friendship— will always be an advertisement to Jeremy, a placard. Like some vacation brochure, always a preview, always a tidbit; never the real thing.

That sucks, and it would suck more if Jeremy didn’t feel so weightless right now, completely distanced from that reality.
Michael’s honeyed lips were plush, and the way he ruggedly drove them up against Jeremy’s, kind of lazily, was *electrifying*. His heart was the only thing he could hear anymore, he’s deaf other than the banging like a parade of timpanis in his ears.

God, he didn’t know how much more euphoric the real thing could be.

Jeremy also didn’t know *where* he learned how to kiss. He shouldn’t be this good, right? He’s only had like four, maybe five girlfriends before (all of which Jeremy was sort of maybe jealous of now), but Michael, even with a resumé like his, seemed a little too trained. Jeremy couldn’t imagine Michael, a closet gay guy, to have enjoy kissing his girlfriends so much. But here he was, so tender but so rough with Jeremy, in all the right ways.

Maybe he took a college course on it or something, because seriously, what the fuck.

Michael’s left hand twisted around his waist— which, and he will never admit this, but it might’ve elicited some squeak out of him— and the right was placed on the cusp of Jeremy’s jaw, keeping him in place. Keeping him on the floor, keeping him conscious, keeping his body from ascending into the clouds like a balloon.

Of course, his sad realities always come back to bite Jeremy in the ass. It’s a recurring pattern now. He could never just let go or bask in the now.

This… this was what Michael was talking about. A passionate kiss. He’s just showing Jeremy the ropes. That’s all this was.

And he tried not to be sad about that. He tried to remind himself that keeping quiet, keeping this *normal* and platonic was for the greater good; and it was.

But God, he just wanted to spill his heart, right here, right now— experience a *real* kiss, please. As desperate as it sounds, it’s all he wanted.

It’s okay. It’ll be okay. Years down the line, after Jeremy’s crush on Michael dissipates, they’ll laugh about these times. Maybe then, after this is all over, after they’ve graduated and are in the midst of seeking university applications, he’ll bring up the red hot crush on Michael he had at the time, and they’ll laugh about that, too. But for now, he should just bask in this. Because it’ll be okay.

*Just enjoy it for now.*

Jeremy grounded himself to normalcy just enough to not wallow in his sadness anymore, and slightly squinted open an eye, seeing tan skin and heatedly flushed cheeks too close to his face.

Sure, Michael never blushed, but Jeremy didn’t let that get his hopes up. He wouldn’t let himself be destroyed by something so small and unnoticeable. He reasonably figured that a situation like *this* was a little different, so of course Michael’s nervous too. Jeremy’s probably a hundred times redder. His cheeks felt like the surface of the Sun.

It felt *good*, okay? Sure there was a slight sting in his chest, and he felt pricking along his gnawed off skin, but Michael didn’t grind their lips together painfully, nor did he shove his tongue into Jeremy’s mouth with no pretense.

No, Michael was smoother than that, and sure, he wasn’t too soft or delicate or precise, but that’s exactly what made it so mind-numbingly hot.

Michael tilted his head a little farther to the side, tenderly brushing his hand down to Jeremy’s chin
and tipping it upwards slightly, just for some better access, considering Michael was kind of on top of him.

He broke the kiss for millisecond intervals, to readjust or breathe, where Jeremy would push right back in in consonance.

Maybe he whimpered between one of those interims, maybe he didn’t, frankly Jeremy just hoped Michael didn’t hear it.

So he willed away any heat going south and tried to focus more on not making anymore noise.

Difficult. That proved to be um, really difficult.

Because Michael slid Jeremy’s bottom lip between his teeth and gently bit. Jeremy honest-to-God tried, he really fucking tried, but with Michael’s half second notice, he couldn’t stifle the soft, shameless moan. It just slipped out into the air, and he knew Michael heard it.

Unsurprisingly, the air went thick with Michael’s radiating smugness, who quickly licked down the bite—a sensation so sensitive and pleasurable that he shivered and will probably reel in for the rest of his life, but dear God, Jeremy couldn’t risk making anymore noises after that—like he was disinfecting a wound, then finally pulled himself off.

And yep, there he was, in all his quirked eyebrow glory, conveying nothing but stout confidence and a snarky look of ‘Oh?’.

Jeremy looked away, downcast, to the floor, apparently now more interested in the intricate patterns of Ms Langit’s carpet.

That was a line he crossed, wasn’t it? Noises like that, noises of pleasure. Dear God, Michael, you got to stop making Jeremy break his rules. They’re there for a reason, and those reasons are protecting the integrity of your friendship.

Jeremy kept his eyes there, fixed, staring in one, blank spot, unblinking, like it was some advanced calculus question that he almost knew the answer to. He wasn’t near courageous enough to actually look at Michael anymore, because knew it’d just make him more red, and that’d be suspicious—and damn it! His face was hot enough already!

Fuck. He was still recovering from that kiss. His lips felt so puffy, and his lungs were devoid of any breath.

Wait. It’s silent. Under the salient percussion of heartthrob, the room was completely soundless.

And Jeremy didn’t see why the quiet air was making his pulse race, or why his awareness of every minute detail in the room has tripled.

It’s fine, it’s totally, totally fine. Michael probably didn’t even hear him and he’s probably just distracted by a delayed, high-induced thought process. He’ll say something soon, then apologise for it being so belated.

Then Michael started laughing.

It’s a wheezy laugh that ends with a pat on Jeremy’s shoulder, and Michael’s face too close to his own.

“So I’m good, aren’t I?” he said, his voice is lazy and laced with weed and kind of… deep,
especially when it’s so close to his ear. Then, after a sharp, indrawn breath and two feet of backpedalling, he laughed again; maybe Jeremy’s face shriveled up or, well, no, it definitely went red, again.

At least Michael backed off. The new, expanded space between them was a little relieving.

Then the same silence kicked in. A silence that would probably kill Jeremy if left unattended too long. Not even metaphorically, Jeremy thought.

But he didn’t know what to say. There were so many things he wanted to say, but couldn’t. Something was just, choking him, thoughts were just choking him and something the size of an orange was lodged in his throat.

He wanted to ask Michael if he heard the moan, but judging by his demeanor, he surely must’ve. So “Where did you even learn that?” was the first and only thing that he mustered up the ability to say, and it still came out broken.

Jeremy explicitly tried to keep his eyes warded away from Michael, just so he could make room to breathe a little, but it didn’t work. His predisposed efforts ended up with Jeremy flitting his eyes back and forth between Michael and the carpet with two second intervals. God, he probably looked even more nervous now.

“Girlfriends,” Michael hiccuped. “oh, and my mom used to leave around these erotic fiction novels. They’re pretty educational.” he said, and for the next quarter of a second that Jeremy dared to glance up at him, he was wiggling his eyebrows.

He wasn’t too sure whether or not Michael was joking, his tone was untraceable of any decided emotion and offbeat. Jeremy elected it was best not to ask, he just chuckled and left it.

“You wanna try doing that again tomorrow? I’m all kissed-out for today, plus we should probably start reading out act two.” Michael yawned, but it was only seven thirty. Was he bored? Oh, kissing Michael must be really boring. He did almost all of the work, Jeremy just made accidental noises and clung onto the collar of his shirt.

Jeremy sighed, but Michael didn’t look disappointed in him. Cheery, actually, with hazy, half-lidded eyes. You could still see his scleras though, and, yup, red and veiny. Jeremy wondered how much he’d smoked.

Reading out act two seemed so boring in comparison to everything else right now. For some reason, even though Jeremy couldn’t risk having a conversation about their latest… encounter, he’s still going to grieve over how it went so unaddressed. Not even a sly quip, his brain supplied, those were Michael’s signature!

Jesus Christ, Jeremy needed to find out what he wanted more and just reevaluate himself. He was so addled that he didn’t even know his own priorities anymore. Michael came into his love-life and fucked nonsensical things like rules over, and ugh, Jeremy loved that about him.

“Oh— yeah. Okay.” Jeremy pieced together, grabbing his script and fumbling with it in his hands. He noticed his lips felt puffy.

Michael smiled, but the mirth in his eyes didn’t feel innocent. Probably appeased at how much of a stumbling geek Jeremy was, how much of a stumbling geek he made Jeremy be. He pulled the strings here, so he’s probably proud of the damages.

The next sentence bundled out of Jeremy’s mouth unintentionally, and he regretted it right after.
“You were really good, by the way.” he said, his volume petering out with every word as he slowly drew to the conclusion that yeah, it was pretty fucking weird to say that. He could already feel Michael’s glance (which he refused to make eye contact with) burning holes into his side.

There was a moment of hesitation. “Yeah?” Michael asked.

Jeremy wasn’t sure of what else he could say. He nodded, and let words run off his tongue—probably something that Jeremy Heere should never do, but he didn’t care. He was still living off his high.

“Yeah.” Then, “I mean, I’m glad I’ve got a really good teacher.”

Really, Jeremy? You’re lucky Michael didn’t overthink everything, or, more appropriately, you’re lucky Michael never noticeably overthought everything, that he had the capability to look past those kinds of slip-ups and not make things anymore awkward than they had to be.

“I’m glad I’ve got such a good student.”

Jeremy did not have the same capability. Sure, he tried not to overthink the way Michael’s voice darkened when he called Jeremy ‘good’, but Jeremy tries to do a lot of things. And he fails at a lot of those things.

This was just one of those things.

Voice dry and at a lost of words, a flustered Jeremy spluttered out “Y-yeah?”, hating himself for stuttering like a sobbing child, but being too nerve-wracked to even process that self-loathing.

“Yeah.”

But the way Michael said it, holy fuck, what’s with his voice tonight? Maybe he was hallucinating, maybe he was hearing what he wanted to hear, but Michael sounded an octave or two lower, and Jeremy’s spine shivered innately, replaying it in his head and honeying into the pillows.

“Sorry if the whole… lip biting thing freaked you out, by the way.” Michael said, after a moment of hesitation, and Jeremy’s heart went on a confused slant while the air in his lungs was slowly regressing into emptiness. “I didn’t think about it, I guess I just wanted to know how you’d react.”

Jeremy might’ve accidentally let his eyes slip over to Michael, who, even though he was lazily sprawled out against the cushions, had some pink tinge to his cheeks and looked slightly concerned.

He’s embarrassed. Michael Mell was embarrassed, ladies and gentleman, and all it took was four fake kisses and a month of Jeremy’s heart-wrenching love for him to get him there.

Jeremy snickered, taking some prideful stock out of this moment where Michael Mell, the epitome of lazy superiority and confidence, bowed down to things like self-doubt.

“I didn’t think you’d like it.”

Nevermind. Jeremy just broke in half and almost fell off the couch, he didn’t have anything to be proud of anymore.

Change the subject, change the subject, change the subject, the reasonable voice told him.

But sorry, Jeremy’s lip he’s been biting dropped open and his mouth was sputtering out empty
syllables like his memory’s been wiped and he forgot how to talk.

“What? I didn’t— what makes you say that?” he huffed.

Michael chuckled, like Jeremy just doubted fact. “You legit like, moaned, Jeremy, did you not hear yourself?”

Jeremy flushed red. Hot, too hot. He heaved and shot his eyes away from Michael, mortified.

Fuck, well uh. Jeremy had hoped that it would at least go implicit, but thanks, whatever Michael, this is cool too. “I— fine, whatever! It– it felt good and I was surprised! Shut, shut up. Noises happen.”

Jeremy wanted to die. This, this is why he just wanted to get on with their night and not mention it, and this is why he should’ve fought more to change the subject when he could. He rather be anywhere except Michael’s basement right now.

“Woah, woah, man, don’t get all worked up over this, it was cute.”

Cute. Jeremy’s head spat, like it was apparently the only thing that mattered in Michael’s fumbled sentence.

And ew, it sounded like mockery, or was it supposed to be flattery? Jeremy didn’t know what it was, or how he felt about it. His spine purred and he just knew that he was definitely feeling something, something loud; it’s just inscrutable and elated confusing and IT HURTS.

His heart hasn’t slowed down since the kiss, and Jeremy was quickly getting the impression that he might pass out if things don’t go back to normal soon. Adrenaline highs aren’t supposed to withstand for minutes, right?

God. He felt dizzy, he wondered if this was what cocaine was like, then wondered why anyone would willingly put themselves through this.

You put yourself through this. his head gracefully reminded him.

“Cute?” Jeremy stammered, seething with red hot ears. God, why was he doing this to himself? It’s like he’s doubling down, it’s like he wanted to have this conversation because he’s not trying put it to an end.

Maybe because he did want to have this conversation, and if so, Jeremy has the worst self-preservation instincts on Earth.

But it’s not like he could change that. He couldn’t even control his lips anymore— and why couldn’t he? They’re his lips after all!

“Yeah, y’know, pretty. A pretty noise.” Michael said, voice a little hesitant and confused, and fuck, Jeremy’s blood was boiling, he couldn’t of just said that, right— and, better question, what was Jeremy’s response to it? What was his response supposed to be?

He felt like breath was being drained out of his body— both in the worst and the best ways possible. Was he breathing? Was he even alive anymore? Had Jeremy died and gone to heaven?

Actually no. This was kind of like hell actually. It’s euphoric but painful, mixing together in one confusing cocktail. Michael was the bartender. Jeremy was an alcoholic.
Jeremy should end this kissing pact, right here, right now. This was going too far, this wasn’t what best friends did, he shouldn’t tease himself with this anymore.

That’s the rational side talking, now back to the emotional side.

That emotional side ignored it, had no restraint, and reached over to peck Michael on the cheek softly. Those kisses aren’t even in the pact, but Michael didn’t look offended.

God, Jeremy’s going fucking insane and it’s all Michael Mell’s fault. It’s a constant brawl for dominance and this is why Jeremy thinks he’s in hell.

He retracted back onto his side of the couch, and mumbled. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” affirmed Michael, maybe winking, maybe not, Jeremy wasn’t looking anymore, because he couldn’t look anymore.

Jeremy hissed. He shouldn’t tempt himself with Michael’s flirty nature and platonic kisses— it’s wrong. He knew that.

So why is he still doing it?

God, they’ve escalated from platonic hand-holding, shotgunning, and close-knit, emotional hugs to platonic kisses, cuddling, and compliments about Jeremy’s less-than-platonic noises.

What haven’t we done? He thought, then: Wait, don’t answer that.

Jeremy wasn’t sure how much more of this he could take. He wasn’t sure of how all of this was so easy for Michael, how he saw nothing wrong, how apparently, this was normal for him.

He didn’t know how far he could push this, he didn’t know what Michael would do for him if he just passed it off as fake or for practice.

IT HURTS, but Jeremy wanted to know. He needed to know, he wanted to find out, he wanted to be swallowed by this fire he set, he should— he deserved it.

Jeremy wanted to damn himself, throw it all away, and pretend this was all real. Call Michael endearing nicknames and stop stifling his noises and kiss down his neck just so he could get to the point where he could finally believe his own lies.

Jeremy wanted to completely break down that wall between romantic and platonic and be broken by it. Be broken, destroyed, ruined, by Michael, just because he’s selfish, just because he needed that satisfaction, that completion in his life, and IT HURTS.

It’d drive him insane. It’s already driving him insane, because he knows nothing would gratify him or his fantasies, Jeremy would always be after the real thing, wouldn’t he?

The real thing was what he wanted. The real thing was what he couldn’t have, and still, Jeremy wanted to risk everything just to get close to it.

Because a taste is better than nothing, right?

Wrong. Not here.

He knew better. He knew he’d be jeopardizing his entire eleven-year spanning friendship with Michael just so he could rid himself of this painful pining streak he had for him.
He’d be disgusted with himself, and it’d never work anyways. Nothing he had to pass off as platonic to get Michael to do would be real. It’d never be enough, because it’s not enough, it’s not real.

It’s never going to kill the craving, and enrolling himself with Michael’s platonic gestures, indulging in platonic affection and complying with platonic kisses just makes the sting hurt more.

It didn’t help him, nothing would, because Jeremy was helpless. That was a desperate fantasy supplied by a depraved, desolate romantic that needed more than just kisses and compliments to placate the hunger in his heart.

He just wanted to be convinced, he just wanted closure and was needy for attention, so badly that he disregarded reality and overstepped his best friend duties.

He’s doing it now, he’s been doing it, because here he was, sitting on the couch in Langit’s basement, shaking in his seat because best friends shouldn’t do what we just did.

He knew he shouldn’t be this close to bordering that line, and he knew he shouldn’t be wanting to go closer.

So he didn’t. Because he knew better than to let himself fall victim to the fire he started. He knew better than to let himself be swallowed by greed and lust and love for this stupid boy, even if IT HURTS, even if all he wants is more.

This was a fight— no, it was the fight, that Jeremy kindled in his chest. Nestled between his ribcage, oppressed from ever spilling out into his thoughts, into the real world. Small voices carried the messages to Jeremy’s head. Messages he always had to bat down with reality.

It was a battle others couldn’t see, a battle between Jeremy and himself. It bled out in times like these, because sometimes, it suffocated him too much to bare.

Jeremy sighed, the short stretch of silence damning him alone with the counterintuitive record player that spun the soft hum of a continuum on the phonograph in his mind. He should get out of here, or at least out of his head.

“So,” he started, breaking the quiet that apparently only he’d noticed. His blood pressure seemed to be finally cooling down after a fifteen minute session of constant skyrocketing, and he’s grateful for that.

Seriously, it’s like dropping from a skyscraper. It’s scary and superdrenal and it sucks when you couldn’t escape it.

God, he knows that earlier he was disappointed about how they weren’t gonna mention it and how going back to reading the script again would’ve been so boring in comparison, but like, Jeremy was exhausted now. He’d love to read over act two.

“act two. Cue me.” he commanded, happy with himself, because he changed the subject. Thanks, voice in his head, for trying to up his confrontation-evasion skills. He needed those badly, so he noted it down to practice those more often with Michael, too.
If a viewer had to recount the rest of Thursday night’s latest episode of Jeremy-Heere’s-Shitty-Sitcom-Life to their friend, they probably wouldn’t say much, considering after the kiss-debacle, it was mostly just Michael’s awful impressions of different characters cueing Jeremy, and Jeremy pretending he wasn’t blushing over how much of a dork Michael was.

So it was a lazy night. A comfortable night of falling head over heels and joke acting. Michael took a couple more hits out of a bong— where did he get a bong? Better question, where did he hide a bong? — and they finished up their reading of the full script.

Oh, and apparently they’re going out for dinner tomorrow, too, the two of them, alone.

Jeremy tried to make that sound less like a date, but his love-induced brain would always linger back to that notion and read too far into things.

What could you expect? Michael even joked about calling it a date himself. The idea was put in Jeremy’s head, of course he’d overthink it.

Anyway. The episode could probably be explained with just a few paragraphs.

Michael had been slurring almost all of his cues for the last hour. Or saying them delayedly and with infuriating pauses between words. Or forgetting what cue to say or what page they were on.

It was cute, but frustrating. He got adorably angry whenever Jeremy didn’t understand what he was saying, but it was almost impossible to decipher. He sounded so sleepy and so distant and his speech muddled together and Jeremy’s pretty sure he passed out a few times.

His eyes sometimes fluttered shut whenever Jeremy started talking. It’d be offensive if it wasn’t Michael doing it.

“Mmn, also Jer—” The nickname sprung playful some memories of that trip to the mall in September, a simpler, nostalgic time—

“D’you wanna go to like, Olive Garden or somethin’ tomorrow? Mom’s gonna be out for the night n’she gave me like, a hundid bucks.” asked Michael, in a warm, stupidly buttery, and inviting mumble.

Jeremy, within an instant, forgot his upcoming monologue entirely and tilted his head over at Michael. His body melted into the couch, because hey, that’s just his normal reaction to Michael now apparently.

His voice was perfection, and Jeremy got so caught up in it that he has to parce together what Michael said through replaying the movements of his lips in his head.

Oh, okay, got it.

Well, he wasn’t doing anything tomorrow, probably. His dad never took him out to eat. They ate delivery like three times a week and he sometimes just gave him money so Jeremy could go out to eat, alone — or with Michael. “Sure, how much should I bring?”

“Nah nah nah nah. I’ve got you, I got a hundid!” Michael exclaimed, and he sunk back into the couch slackly.

Then it went back to normalcy, passing each other lines to read out. It’s a boring, but cozy
normalcy)

So yeah, nothing really happened in that episode. Jeremy left around eight, and came home to a promising utopia of white Chinese take-out boxes on the kitchen bar.

Since mid-September, Jeremy couldn’t believe how little a priority upping his social game has become.

Maybe he’s only getting popular now because he wasn’t trying so hard anymore (not caring was in, right?), but keeping his crush hidden turned into public enemy number one, so social life was pushed into second slot by natural selection.

Sure, friends were great, he wanted them, yes, of course! Status? That’d be great too! He didn’t like being bullied, he didn’t like being picked last or getting snide comments in the atrium and yeah, he gets lonely sometimes.

But his infatuation for Michael— and he’s still trying to call it that like it’s some silly puppy-love crush (insulting to the realization that happened only a few days ago that he was actually in love with him) — was his top concern.

Of course, it was still all too new to him when people actually started talking to him in class— people who weren’t Michael, but that’s okay— and asking him to hang out and texting his number. It’s foreign, to Jeremy.

He wondered if Michael was getting the same treatment, but after a week of sitting at Rich’s table, his follower count on Instagram jumped up another two hundred, so that answered that question.

For Jeremy, his day-to-day life at Middleborough changed greatly. Sure, he still spent most of his time with Michael, but they weren’t harassed or ignored anymore. They were treated like people, people who didn’t deserve to be pushed against lockers or stalked or tripped, and that was… that was insane!

He’s been raving about this to Rich, constantly thanking him for saving his high-school repertoire (showing his gratitude with Chemistry notes and spare pencils, so he still getting nerds to do his homework, just through alternative methods), and they’ve really started getting close.

Rich was probably Jeremy’s second— well, maybe third, Christine existed too— closest friend, and despite his non-stop cockiness and sometimes uncomfortably ribald humour, he’s still probably the Coolest person Jeremy knew.

And apparently, he knew a lot of Cool people now. Some who actually have a good heart. Some who care. Some who are interested in niche and simple things or have dorky ways to eat mandarins, like Jake.

(Seriously, everyday he brought mandarins to lunch and everyday he ate them in the same, practiced ritual, who does that? It’s weird, but Jeremy found it quirky. Gave him some character besides dumb, popular, and nice)

Jake Dillinger— Jeremy was still hesitant to refer to him only as ‘Jake’, that seemed so casual and he’s a popular jock — partook in Jeremy’s Band class, a class that’d quickly grown to be Jeremy’s favourite, because that’s where he met people like Brooke, and Christine.

Hell, he’s become an actual socialite among the students there, he could identify almost every face
in that class and they clapped unironically whenever he performed. Even Mr Orlov, a grumpy, staunch, Russian man who had a keen only for classical music and wasn’t afraid to let everyone know that, started having some partiality to Jeremy.

In Band, he had space, room to think and people— people who weren’t Michael— to spend time with, and sometimes he kind of needed that. Just so he could gauge his emotions a little better, just to breathe and string his heart out and gain some clarity.

Sometimes, he got too caught up in everything. Sometimes, he needed some relief from the heartthrob that was Michael Mell.

Band was Jeremy’s little escape. A Michael-free fifty minutes cemented into his school-day consigned to talking with some of his other friends (he has other friends now!), and playing the instrument that he’s really starting to pick up, and working through his performance anxiety. There, he could just unwind, and forget.

Today their class had some extra time before the bell rang, which meant Jeremy tinkering with his viola and polishing it off (it’s important to him to keep it shiny!) with Christine at his side, babbling.

This was kind of their routine. Mr Orlov never planned out lessons that extended passed the forty minute mark, making for a good ten minute long break period between classes.

Soft classical music came from the tiny speaker on staunch teacher’s desk, where the man was sitting enveloped in some old, faceless novel. The music definitely wasn’t Jeremy’s style, but it didn’t bother him too much. He still got lost in it instead of Christine’s monologue, on accident, but he was still listening.

“— I don’t know! I wanted to bring Haley, but then she ditched me for Derek, so I’m going with plan B.” said Christine.

“Yea? Who?” Jeremy murmured. He idly curled his beaten fingers between the strings delicately, and peaked under to check that there wasn’t any grime on the neck.

“Brooke. We’re not like, dating, of course, you’d probably be the first to know! But I’m not into girls and her boyfriend’s on vacation, so we’re just going together.”

Going together where?

Jeremy snapped up, and tilted his head at Christine in confusion.

Of course, he couldn’t just ask her now, that’d be so insulting, and he knew Christine well enough to know that she sort of takes comments like that to heart. “That’s good.”

“Jeremy! Spill! You’ve been so quiet, are you just holding out on me? Who you going with? Or are you one of those guys that’re too cool for homecoming?” Christine burst, and even though she definitely asked three questions, she only used one breath.

Jeremy however, stammered, his smooth mindtrack (supplied by welcomed piano in the background, considering that, in favour of not starting a class revolution, Mr Orlov changed the song to something more modern and jazzy) oriented around viola cleaning coming to a standstill. Homecoming? Wasn’t that supposed to be on Wednesday?

“Wasn’t that supposed to be on Wednesday?” he said plaintively, and without thinking, and thank God Christine didn’t point out or apparently notice how Jeremy hadn’t really been listening.
“No, the DJ got super-duper sick on Monday and then Chloe said something about having to renew our rental at Hobby Lobby or something for the decorations, so long-story-short,— Which, was never the case with Christine— “they had to delay it like, two weeks.” she explained.

She mumbled something like “I’m pretty sure they’re making it Halloween themed now.” but Jeremy was off in his head trying to wrap around Christine’s new bout of information. A disinfectant wipe covered hand fell flat on the chinrest. Homecoming.

Yikes. Of course, it didn’t bother him too much that homecoming was a thing, but the new scheduling meant he’ll have to bask in the ‘I’m a loser who doesn’t go to school dances’ vibe for the next fortnight.

That’ll be fun. He’s already had enough of the afterparty talk, the scandals about who’s-taking-who and the flashy hallway decor— the things that rubbed Jeremy’s loneliness in his face.

“How. I had no clue.” Jeremy muttered, peaking Christine’s fluctuating interest.

“I’m guessing you haven’t asked Michael yet, then?” Christine quipped, with that nosy grin of hers that stretched so far up her face it creased her eyes into black upside-down U shapes.

“I’m sorry?”

“Michael? Why would I ask Michael?” Jeremy dry stuttered— maybe trying to offend Christine’s audacious suggestion, but ending up only offending himself with how dumb he sounded.

Christine, uncharacteristically unfazed, shrugged. “I figured that you’d ask by now? Aren’t you two like, dating?”

Jeremy short-circuited, accidentally flicking one of the fine tuners all the way into the wrong direction. Fuck. He’ll have to fix that soon, but for now he’s kind of in a nonplussed stage of what.

His eyes rolled back into focus, realizing Christine was staring expectantly at him from her stand. On the paper there, she was practicing perfecting treble clefs and drawing scales by hand.

Before Christine could realize that how very, very in the wrong she was in, Jeremy wanted to make himself first to tell her.

“What? No! Michael? We’d never like— ugh! We’re friends, and that’s gross.”

His high voice did a poor job of masking how embarrassed he was, if anything, it just accentuated it. Now he just sounded flustered, and he was, but he’s just bringing more attention to the issue by overlapping the jazz piano and wheezing out like he had asthma.

Kids turned heads, so Jeremy shrunk into his seat. The worst part was how Christine still didn’t look convinced, one public humiliation later.

Fuck, Jeremy couldn’t lie for one second? That’s just unfair.

“Sure.” Christine jeered with her tongue out, and with the adorably sly smile she tried to pull off, Jeremy’s anger dissipated into the air.

He was still halfway towards the floor, small and low profile and quiet just until the masses attention on him shifted back to whatever they were doing.

“I mean it though, we’re not like, anything.” he seethed, and yeah, Christine nodded like she
understood, but that was a photo taken before disaster.

She hummed. “Yeah, but I always thought you wanted to be something with him. I’m not gonna push it but you seem... really interested in him, I just assumed.”

Then, like she didn’t just chuck a bowling ball square between Jeremy’s eyes, she flexed her buffed out nails and gingerly readjusted her new star-shaped earrings.

“Well um, even if you’re not trying to you know, pursue him, you guys could just go as buds!” Christine recovered, apparently coming to terms with the fact that Jeremy was slightly uncomfortable. “It’s fun! You shouldn’t miss ho-co Jeremy! It’s an experience!”

*Experience.* Pft. That was the same reason Christine used to get Jeremy roped into the school play, and looked how that turned out.

Because of his role, because of the play, he was stuck in this predicament with Michael.

It’s not like that was what Jeremy was thinking about anyways. He was still trying to get over how Christine apparently just surmised that he and Michael were ‘a thing’.

All it took was a wild guess to see that Jeremy probably had a crush on Michael? For fuck’s sake, she thought they were *dating,* and she was being *unironic.* Sincere. She genuinely thought that—

Jesus Christ.

She just assumed? That there was *something* romantic there? Was, was Jeremy *that* obvious?

How did she gauge the guess? What was her deciding factor? Was there foul play? How did she determine that it was even a *possibility.* Jeremy didn’t even tell her his sexuality.

Sure Christine was smart, but she wasn’t *dating* smart, so if she knew, then who else did?

She was right about it, she was right that he had a crush on Michael, it wasn’t some crazy conspiracy or wild in the dark guess, she *knew* — and that, that was terrifying.

That meant it was *noticeable* enough to where Christine apparently saw something, realized something, and Christine wasn’t there for platonic nights in the basement or the midnight phone calls.

But he needed to answer her. It was getting suspicious. Spinning head or not.

“Yes. I’ll um. I’ll think about it.”

Thank God the bell rang when it did.
Jeremy did think about it. He thought about it a lot. After he processed that whirlwind of thoughts (courtesy of Christine Canigula) after Band, he got to thinking about asking Michael to homecoming— as friends.

Could you blame him? It’s practically shoved in his face at every corner. He had to think about it, and he had literally no one else to go with.

The lack of questions that Jeremy had taken for granted during the week before the original homecoming started popping up from Brooke, Chloe, Jake, and of course, Christine.

Apparently, they’d just been too new of friends before for personal questions like that before (which they were right to assume, since Jeremy went from one friend to three to seven in like, a week), so now they were seizing the opportunity to besiege him appropriately.

Okay, Jeremy didn’t necessarily hate the homecoming season as a whole.

The hallway decorations— for what they’re worth— complemented a pretty colour scheme and didn’t look too tacky, and the air of excitement made everyone just a little more polite, and well, Jeremy’s always been a sucker for cute events like these.

It was something to celebrate. Something to get dolled up for, a party, a break from school work stresses.

It’s different, it’s new, and being apart of the semi-formal mania— being apart of something that wasn’t a Call of Duty sniper clan for once— was nice to Jeremy.

Still. It could definitely get on his nerves, and it definitely did.

It was Friday. It’s been Friday, probably the longest Friday of his life, and Jeremy was finally in Lunch now. He found himself sitting, again, at the popular kids table like he’s been doing every other day this week, trying to manage the hundreds of thoughts trains zipping through his head, to little avail.

What was a game changer in the fight against an impending headache was how the cafeteria looked and sounded a little different today. Jake and his lackeys being gone meant half the clearing was emptied out, which, due to some easy math, made it a lot more quiet.

Jeremy just assumed they had some football tryout to go to, because it’s that season again and everyone he’s ever seen in a varsity jacket before and their mothers have gone missing.
But to Jeremy's dismay, ‘Jake's lackeys’ also included Rich, aka the only other guy who would be sitting at the table; so lunch ended up a period dedicated to him and Michael batting away a swaddle of question from girls — girls who, apparently, didn’t know what privacy was.

Actually, scratch that, the boys didn’t either. But they never cared to talk about things like school dances, they were more interested in the extracurriculars and national sports and sex scandals.

It’s kind of childish— it being the homecoming rave— or at least that’s what Jeremy thought. But Chloe and Brooke and Jenna and Christine and Michael were slowly turning his view around.

Christine showed up at their lunch table, fueling the fire because evidently, and Jeremy didn’t know this either, he’s the most interesting guy in the school now.

Christine being there was unusual in itself. She never sat at their table, and maybe she just didn’t like Jake or Rich or maybe she hated big crowds, but she just followed him straight from Band, and ignored her usual table full of the peppy theatre nerds.

“I’m just saying, red looks good on you, Mell. Maybe you should get a red bowtie.” Chloe mused, looking down the two from the opposite side of the bench. She, again, donned a mauve pink Jamba Juice in her hand.

Jeremy was still trying to figure out where and when she got them everyday. She couldn’t drive, and even if she could, the nearest Jamba Juice was ten minutes away and Lunch started like, fifteen minutes ago. There might be a conspiracy here, Jeremy will investigate.

“Who said I was going?” said Michael, he looked tired, and his incredulous tone supported Jeremy’s theory. Weird. He should’ve slept a lot last night, right? He was so tired when Jeremy left, he couldn’t imagine Michael staying up for much longer afterwards.

Or he’s just exhausted from homecoming pestering, and, if so, Jeremy shared the sentiment. Still, it was nice to imagine Michael wearing a red bowtie in a dress shirt. Maybe even one of those classic black gilets too, that’d be hot.

“We did.” Christine and Brooke unanimously agreed.

Michael snickered and rolled his brown eyes. He had a Slurpee in his hand, coloured an atypically fluorescent blue, and Jeremy silently wondered if it was radioactive.

But it didn’t matter. It had enough sugar, and that’s the purpose it served for Michael. They (being everyone who spoke to Michael) were lucky that there was a Seven Eleven so close to the school, because Michael’s midday pick-me-ups were the only things keeping him together.

The one day he went without it made him so snappy that he tried starting three fights and gave some small annoying prick in his math class a black eye. To be fair, the guy had it coming, he called Michael a fag, and wouldn’t stop pestering him. “I gotta spend money on some shitty-semi formal now?”

“Mmn, nah. A red tie would actually look better, don’t you think?” Chloe continued, nudging her arm a little too forcefully into Brooke’s shoulder, tapping her manicured nails against the table.

Valentine was usually pretty reticent and dismissive about these type of subjects. She always acted above it all, but apparently, homecoming was a different story.

She’s been unusually involved in semi-formal prep and talk, but word is she’s organizing it herself this year with the social events committee (for extra credit), so she’s probably just trying to
promote it using her status. That’d check out for Chloe Valentine.

Brooke sighed, resigning from her cherry lollipop, then tilted her head over to Michael. “Are you wearing a suit jacket or just a shirt?”

“I don’t think I even own a suit jacket, do I need one?”

With another very obvious and cursory up-and-down look of Michael’s stature, Brooke shrugged.

“Need? From what I’ve seen of your arms, you could just wear a shirt.” Chloe stepped in, deadpanning, and this just in, Chloe Valentine is apparently still invincible to feelings and nice gestures.

She made what Jeremy thought was compliment sound like a threat.

Jeremy’s eyes grazed over towards Michael, who had a pretty uneasy expression as he slunk into the bench. He too, looked confused and slightly nervous.

How could he not? Chloe made it sound like him having bearable enough arms to ‘just wear a shirt’ sound like a spiteful declaration of war.

He slid over to Jeremy and muttered, “Is that a good thing?”

“Yes, Mike. It means you have nice muscles.” Christine pitched in, giggling.

Michael just scoffed. He looked down at his clad arms dubiously, squinting and humming, before he turned his head back at the four girls.

“Yeah, by the tone of your voice, I’m almost tempted to believe you out of pure fear.”

Jeremy chuckled dreamily, and yeah, he didn’t necessarily mean to, but his focus fell solely on Michael, and his gradual disconnect from tangible reality was cemented into stone. He’s a goner. Of course, their table conversation didn’t involve him anyways, but to keep quiet, he stifled some laughter into his shirt neckline.

“He slid over to Jeremy and muttered, “Is that a good thing?”

“Yes, Mike. It means you have nice muscles.” Christine pitched in, giggling.

Michael just scoffed. He looked down at his clad arms dubiously, squinting and humming, before he turned his head back at the four girls.

“Yeah, by the tone of your voice, I’m almost tempted to believe you out of pure fear.”

Jeremy chuckled dreamily, and yeah, he didn’t necessarily mean to, but his focus fell solely on Michael, and his gradual disconnect from tangible reality was cemented into stone. He’s a goner. Of course, their table conversation didn’t involve him anyways, but to keep quiet, he stifled some laughter into his shirt neckline.

“Oh, by the way, I was thinking—” Christine pitched in, giggling.

Michael just scoffed. He looked down at his clad arms dubiously, squinting and humming, before he turned his head back at the four girls.

“Yeah, by the tone of your voice, I’m almost tempted to believe you out of pure fear.”

Jeremy chuckled dreamily, and yeah, he didn’t necessarily mean to, but his focus fell solely on Michael, and his gradual disconnect from tangible reality was cemented into stone. He’s a goner. Of course, their table conversation didn’t involve him anyways, but to keep quiet, he stifled some laughter into his shirt neckline.

“Oh, by the way, I was thinking—” Christine pitched in, giggling.

Michael just scoffed. He looked down at his clad arms dubiously, squinting and humming, before he turned his head back at the four girls.

“Yeah, by the tone of your voice, I’m almost tempted to believe you out of pure fear.”

Jeremy chuckled dreamily, and yeah, he didn’t necessarily mean to, but his focus fell solely on Michael, and his gradual disconnect from tangible reality was cemented into stone. He’s a goner. Of course, their table conversation didn’t involve him anyways, but to keep quiet, he stifled some laughter into his shirt neckline.

“Just send me pictures of your closet?” Brooke said, passing Michael her phone.

Seconds passed, and he turned to gnawing on the collar band as his eyes drew across Michael’s features.

Jeremy wasn’t nervous, no, he just found himself staring at Michael fondly, lost in thought—and he couldn’t give any valid reason why, but he felt warm and consoled and fuzzy and the wet fabric between his teeth became an absent-minded stim.

He probably had some stupid hue of pink blooming across his cheeks right now, too.

Because yeah, Jeremy wasn’t nervous, but he was a little flustered.

He couldn’t tell anyone why specifically, but he certainly wasn’t thinking about Michael’s arms, no sir-eee, not how strong he was or how he could probably bench Jeremy’s weight.

Not his golden-tan skin or the expertly-sized notch in his dark pinched brows or any of the quirks that Jeremy fell in love with. Definitely not how he’d look in a suit with a fitting red tie or his rugged flair after he carded his fingers through his hair that was more hot than it should be.

And even if Jeremy was thinking about all that, no one was looking at him, so no one cared. There
wasn’t any proof against him, therefore he wasn’t guilty.

He was in the clear, the irrelevant conversation rendering him undetectable to the rest of the table.

No one knew or could know how head over heels he was for Michael. Normally being invisible to other people would upset him, but he’s been swept onto the clouds, too weightless and distant to care anymore.

His head sat askew, on a steepled hand with glassed-over eyes taking in the far away world around him. Jeremy was lucky everyone else was so engrossed in Michael’s outfit choices to notice him, because God, he’s not good at keeping secrets, even when his life’s on the line.

He was well aware that he probably looked like some aloof and in-love idiot right now, with the way he’s staring at Michael.

It’s not like he could help it.

“Jeremy, ugh. Did you space out?” Brooke huffed, her hand materialising and waving back and forth like a windshield wiper in front of Jeremy’s face.

He blinked, sloughed his shoulders and redirected his nervous gaze away from Michael.

“No?” Jeremy tried, but she just sniggered with no conviction.

Here’s the thing about Brooke. Brooke didn’t seem to ask whether or not Jeremy was going to homecoming. To her, it was like fact, he was going, even they had to drag him there, kicking and screaming.

He was her new project. Not just hers, Chloe’s too. They surveyed him with vulture eyes and too wide of grins, humming in thought at their new prey. Jeremy was a plaything, a doll for them to play dress up with.

Beats being shoved into lockers and laughed at.

The first question Brooke asked was whether or not he had nice enough clothes to wear, and when Jeremy snarkily replied “I’m guessing a t-shirt and a cardigan won’t work”, her second question was what day he was free to go to the mall.

(So that’s how, later, on Sunday, he’d gotten roped into going to a mall with Brooke Lohst, and by extension, Chloe Valentine.

He’d be going then apparently, with or without a date. That’s something freshman year Jeremy would never even think to have the courage to do, but he’s been coaxed in by peer pressure and by some weird, needy drive burrowed in his ribcage.

Mall. Right. They went to the mall. Not the B-List stripmall Michael and Jeremy loved, but the actual city mall.

What seemed like hours of arguments, window-shopping trips and musings— like ‘I think a baby blue button down would look good’ or ‘how do you feel about overalls’— Chloe and Brooke decked Jeremy out with something decent to wear for homecoming.

Scratch ‘decent’. It was kind of perfect.

It was used, second-hand, and nothing too formal, but other than how it was a little too big on his
shoulders and had a slightly longer tail than he was going for, he loved it.

Jeremy should’ve trusted their fashion senses sooner. They were *geniuses*, an adjective he’d never use to describe the hottest girls in school.

Yet again, he never imagined ever *talking* to the hottest girls in school, but here they were, forming a new bond of camaraderie.

Brooke plucked out a royal blue tie, claiming it complimented his eyes, while Chloe snorted and helped him rent out a pair of brownish-black dress shoes, since their budget wasn’t made in mind of overpriced leather loafers.

Michael still hasn’t seen it, and for some reason, Jeremy didn’t want to show him just yet. He’ll leave it as a surprise for if Michael actually ends up going)

---

Lunch ended quickly. Not that that was surprising, time seemed to move a lot faster when you’re zoned out in the middle of a conversation over what is an ‘appropriate’ shade of red to wear to a semi-formal, but at least Jeremy remembered to eat.

Christine also got around to telling him about how she was *so* upset that play rehearsal was cancelled tonight. Mr Reyes apparently forgot to reserve the auditorium and the janitors weren’t staying overtime on short notice.

In all honesty, he’d forgotten anyway. He had… other plans for tonight that took a little higher priority.

So, after hearing a whiny spiel about how pointless it was for custodians to clean it for the weekend (“Seriously! No one *uses* it on the weekend! Why don’t they just clean it on Monday!”) and a couple of pitiful side-glances from Michael, Jeremy was out of the canteen and back into the busy hallways of Middleborough.

Again, even though he wasn’t the scum of the school anymore, teenagers were still jerks. Anxiety was high and Jeremy was just trying to survive his route to English, dodging classmates and dropouts alike.

Question, why would *anyone* stop in the middle of the hallway? Jeremy almost absent-mindedly bumped into the back of some ignorant girl who was *supposed* to be leading the traffic.

Could talking to friends not wait? Seriously, was *now* the time to catch up on the gossip grapevine? Phones exist for a reason.

Ugh. Those people were the worst. Jeremy’s toes hurt from grinding to a stop so quickly. Why couldn’t this girl just keep walking?

A mob of people are trying to scramble their way to class in a short, three-minute timespan and you just *stop*? You block people off and risk showing up late yourself because *hey!* *There’s Leah!* *I have to tell her what happened in Math today!*
Jeremy grumbled and robotically spun to the other side of the hall, finally making peace with hallway-heckling-blondes as he reached a spacious open area.

English— like on most days where there was no play rehearsal— would probably end up being a period dedicated to as many Shakespearean references and dramatic novel reenactments as humanly possible.

That wasn’t bothering him much anymore, acting apparently wasn’t a problem anymore. Michael was apparently that imposing.

A pool of dread pent up in his stomach for the last three periods. He didn’t get a study hall during seventh this week, so he spent the entirety of History forgetting how to breathe normally, keeping his eyes off Michael, and trying to untie the knot in his abdomen.

And when the resounding dismissal bell tolled at 2:45, the painful dread was cemented in him.

It was a longer ring that spanned seconds, maybe minutes— a ring with a lot more finality than the ones that started periods off.

Or maybe Jeremy just hallucinated that part. Maybe the bell was just replaying through his head, over and over again, maybe that’s why it sounded so long.

He gulped nervously as Michael looked over at him. Their plans for tonight had already been set in stone, and even if Jeremy was probably pallid or green and could definitely pull off the ‘I’m sick’ excuse, there was no backing out now.

He wouldn’t let himself pussy out of a free dinner just because of some stupid suggestion he got hooked on.

They’d walk over to Jeremy’s, wait a couple of hours stalling and playing video-games (because three in the afternoon was not a suitable time for dinner ), and Mr Heere would just drive them to Olive Garden.

Then Jeremy would attempt to ask Michael to homecoming.

Of course, he had other opportunities to ask next week, but he figured he should get it over with; that is, if he actually wants to do it.

Something that had really only been a tease in Band this morning had warped his head into delusion. Somehow, after Christine hung up the idea, it’d never left his mind. It twisted into an actual possibility, with an actual probability of Michael saying yes—

“Hey, buddy, you ready to head out?” suggested Michael, who was still at their table, but apparently already packed and standing up.

Unfortunately, he was still anxious to ask it.

He suddenly took into consideration his surroundings; on his desk, a closed binder, a textbook on his lap, and from across the room, wayward scrutiny exuding off his teacher, Mr Calum. Then, of course, Michael.
His saviour from the demon trap of internal dialogue, who had roused Jeremy out of his thoughts and bend him back into reality using his weapon of mass destruction. Sure, maybe if he didn’t use a voice that sounded like *that* Jeremy would’ve ignored him, but *fuck*, Jeremy’s knees went weak and wobbly when he tried to stand.

He didn’t know how Michael packed tenderness and the right amount of gravelly edge into one raspy hum, but he shivered from the sound alone.

Jeremy swallowed his feelings and looked up at Michael, flushing. God, it was so weird (scratch that, it’s stupid and desperate) how just the simplest things he noticed made Jeremy’s heartbeat double.

*Get a grip.* That’s what he needed to do. He needed to remember that it still wasn’t okay to break any of the rules. He needed to remember that they’re still friends and letting himself be the lovesick idiot he is was only going to get him in more trouble.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

He swung his backpack over one shoulder and tried to find his tongue in dry desert of a mouth, following Michael out of the classroom.

---

This crush Jeremy’s taken on Michael had essentially rewired his brain to overthink almost everything.

It sucks. He panicked about the simplest things. The things that before, Jeremy wouldn’t think twice or tilt his head at. Things that didn’t have a second meaning, that didn’t have any importance —

Things that hung onto Jeremy like a leech, things that now, he overthought and scratched his head at.

Michael reworked his mind; made him *think* things he shouldn’t think, made him *feel* things he shouldn’t feel, made him *do* things he shouldn’t do.

In the hour and a half before Mr Heere dropped them off some strain of the chain restaurant, Michael and Jeremy played video-games for a little, sat out on the balcony outside Jeremy’s window, and half-assed some homework.

Yes. There were a couple chaste and short kisses, but Jeremy knew better than to think about them too much. He still did, but they were caged in the back of his head, confined to distant murmurs that kicked off a headache.

But they’re not what took priority right now. Dressing up for fucking *Olive Garden* turned into a ten minute debacle of Jeremy picking out what jacket looked best over his t-shirt while Michael played *Player Unknown’s Battlegrounds* on his computer.

It didn’t even matter. He didn’t have to be anything special for Michael, and *Olive Garden* was extremely casual, but he still wanted to look nice.
He tried to wrap that up to excitement over finally going out to eat at somewhere half decent, but his guilty conscience bit him in the ass.

Looking nice was just one of the things he cared about now, and it was probably because of Michael.

Dinner was fine. No, dinner was great. Or it should’ve been.

Of course, it’s Michael and Jeremy, best friends of eleven years and the resident New Jersey dorks, so there wasn’t any air of tension and nothing went unsaid between them.

Dinner was driven by noisy giggle-fits, a shedding layer of nervousness, and the occasional coherent discussion while they waited for their food. Like—like always, like nothing was different.

He mentioned that because yes, Jeremy still felt like something there was missing inside, something wrong hanging in the air between them, but it’s not like he paid it too much mind. He always felt like this.

There was always a part of him hoping something was left unsaid. That part of him always wanted to be lead on, wanted to think that there was something implicit that Michael hinted at sotto voce, and wanted to believe that there was a mystery to solve between them.

He wanted something to be different. If something was different, it’d be an admission that there was something unresolved between them. It’d confirm Jeremy’s in-over-his-head suspicions. If they were on a weird basis, if there were stiff silences or unfinished sentences, there’d be gaps to fill in. Then Jeremy could supply those blanks. Then Jeremy could act like Michael wanted to say something, but couldn’t. Then Jeremy could pretend they were on the same page.

Then Jeremy would be able to ignore the bone-deep ache in his gut.

But if there was tension, then he’d be able to pinpoint what tension it was. Angry tension? Awkward tension? Romantic tension? Sexual tension?

Maybe scratch that last part. The point being that if there was some unknown material between them, that’d mean that there was material to work with. That meant hope.

Jeremy wanted proof that there was something here, he wanted to know it wasn’t just him making stuff up.

But it always was. He knew that too, he knew Michael didn’t feel anything, and he still liked to play pretend.

Jeremy made empty comments sound suggestive and twisted the tender looks Michael gave him into something more romantic, then acted like this was all okay to want these things.

But those were just the self-destructive tendencies of a boy stupidly in love with his best friend. No restraint and little preservation instincts anymore.

Don’t kid yourself, Jeremy.
Dinner. Right. He zoned out again. Jeremy’s blanked on Michael too many times to count and they haven’t even eaten their mains yet.

Whenever it happened, Jeremy just had to remind himself that ‘hey, you’re still alive, and you’re at dinner, and you need to say something soon, or Michael’s going to get suspicious’.

He made sure to remind himself that every five minutes, just so he could stay in tune with the conversation and not fall into a trap of silence trained on Michael’s eyes.

That wouldn’t be good, and especially now that they’re alone? Now that Jeremy didn’t have Brooke or Chloe or Jenna or Christine to distract him?

He’d see the way Jeremy looks at him. Michael wasn’t an idiot. It’s a death trap, so he has to keep focused and keep the conversation light and fluid.

Other guests at the Olive Garden — which, since it was Friday night, there were many— were probably annoyed at how loud their table was, but both were too embossed in their private bubble to care about other people’s meals.

Probably not the wisest choice to forget that other people existed.

Some old lady came around at some point and asked them to quiet down in her mad ‘I’m sick of your young people shit’ voice, and Jeremy almost hyperventilated. Admittedly, confrontation was not his thing, but he forgot about the ordeal three minutes after she left due to a babyfaced waiter toting a tray of fried mozzarella sticks.

“Thanks.” Michael dismissed, waving his hand.

Appetizers, Jeremy’s weakness. He slunk back into the booth comfortably and sipped on a tumbler half full of rootbeer.

As soon as food arrived, their laughter died down into seldom side conversation and drink refills. A snug air stirred with the mischievous grins and spontaneous snickering from across the table, even though neither were saying or doing anything funny.

Talking with Michael was, and always has been, one of Jeremy’s things to do. Time without him quickly turned to time missing him. Long days or hell, even long hours with no Michael just made him feel uneasy and incomplete.

Maybe Jeremy just had attachment issues, but summer camp voyages or family vacations, tragic phone deaths or just being unexpectedly sick for a day always made something ache in him.

Sure, okay, he liked Michael, but even before the crush started, it was like this. Even if he could, he didn’t like going long without Michael at his side.

You couldn’t really blame him. Michael knew almost everything about Jeremy, they’ve been bound at the hip their entire lives and Jeremy could recite Michael’s answering machine by heart. Of course that made his presence consoling. He just understood Jeremy, and he had bonus points for being funny, attractive, and good with words.

Jeremy didn’t have to explain inside jokes or worry about his impression with Michael. Talking to him was just, easy, easier than talking to anyone else. He was comforting.

“So, what days you got rehearsals next week?”
Even when he was stuffing his face with cheesy hors d’oeuvres.

Jeremy mused into his fist, counting the days in his head, an agreeable air between them settling his frayed nerves just a little. “Mmn, I’m pretty sure I have three. Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Christine will probably tell me if that’s wrong.”

God. Jeremy hated the way Michael perked his eyebrows up at him whenever he mentioned her. It’s a look that meant he still thought Jeremy liked Christine. and boy, he couldn’t be more wrong.

“Right,” Michael murmured, apparently deciding not to comment, but there’s definitely still a sly smile there on his lips that Jeremy wasn’t hallucinating. “you gonna be alright?”

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders and tossed the last stick in his mouth, cocking up an eyebrow.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Jeremy asked.

Michael sloughed, sinking back into the seat. “Eh, we won’t have any time to practice next week. I’m helping my dad move out and pro’ly won’t be able to hang until like, Saturday.” he said.

Jeremy sucked in a breath and forcibly nodded his head. His nerves shook and breaths stung. He didn’t like how to Michael, fake-kissing your best friend was just an inconsequential and simple task.

He didn’t like how it was so easy for him to mention, how he didn’t blush or get nervous whenever it came up, how he didn’t hesitate. Like to him, it was like not having time for video-games or having to bail out plans to go paintballing.

Then again, Jeremy should’ve expected that. He already knew that in Michael’s eyes, they weren’t doing anything wrong. To him, it was just something friends do, and it wasn’t anything more than a trouble-free activity to help out Jeremy’s stage fright.

Still, it hurt to have that idea in his head reinforced. Sometimes, he let himself think that Michael enjoyed what they did in the moment, sometimes he let himself think there was hope.

But he obviously didn’t. Jeremy shouldn’t let his emotions get the best of him. Michael didn’t care, it was just another thing they did together. Another symbol of their eleven year, unbreakable bond — the ability to kiss each other and it still be platonic.


This was the fight. This was what hurt so badly. This was what he was trying to suppress, this was what he was trying to smush down. Wistful thoughts and lingering pipe dreams, chest pains and shaky fingers. He needed to stop doing this to himself.

Then he realized the silence. He reminded himself he’s still alive, and had to say something, so he rolled his eyes, fought the angry flush up his chest, and tried to remember what Michael said last.

“— yeah, um, I’ll be good. You like the new house?”

He tried to make his voice sound full, but like its been since the dinner started, there’s a thick layer of nervousness lining his throat that Jeremy has to get through to actually speak. It gives off a weird, unsteady edge. Jeremy wondered if the oh-so perceptive Michael noticed it.

“Maybe when it has furniture in it. Right now it’s just a house-husk.” Michael said, earning a soft chortle from the other side of the booth. “Pretty excited if I’m honest. There’s a pool, how rad is
that?"

“I’m raiding your dad’s house then, it’s decided.” Jeremy smiled.

Michael snickered, Jeremy took pride in how the recurring smile lines etched either side of his mouth stemmed from *his* jokes. “You know you could just ask to come over.”

“That too.”

A realization came with an anxious huff in stillness. Then, under the table, his fingers bounced across the smooth denim he wore, trying to stem down the slight panic that fled through his spine.

“Hey Michael?” Jeremy said, after swallowing some hesitance down with a swig of root beer.

Michael’s dad was moving into his new home next week, and that meant Jeremy won’t have any time to see Michael outside of school, since he’s already decided to dedicate his after school hours to helping his dad pack up.

Which meant no more opportunities.

So he should ask him now, he should muster up the balls and just take the chance while he has Michael here, while it’s just the two of them alone, while he has Michael’s attention fixed on him.

He shouldn’t try to avoid it, he shouldn’t try to leave it for impersonal text messages or a quick encounter in the school hallways.

But, but for some reason, the question just felt too intimate. It shouldn’t be. It isn’t. It’s *homecoming*, it’s like a middle-school Halloween dance, just for kids a couple years older. It doesn’t have the ‘We’re seniors and this might be the last time I see you’ gravity like prom did, it’s just *homecoming*.

So why was Jeremy so choked up? They’d be going as *friends*, it’s not like their debut as a couple. They’d be dancing to *YMCA* and doing trains around the auditorium with tens of other guys.

Maybe it was just Christine’s words rattling around in his head, maybe that’s what stopping him. Maybe he just has to remind himself that there’s nothing romantic or intimate or weird about just asking Michael if he wants to go.

“What’s up, sinta?” Michael incited, with an award-winning smile that had Jeremy dazed.

But Jeremy couldn’t find it in him to ask. He just couldn’t find the words on the tip of his tongue or the way to get past the ball in his throat. He didn’t know why, or how, but his vocal chords just went missing.

He turned his head down to the basket of breadsticks, muttered “It’s nothing”, and resigned to staring very intently at his fork, eyes downcast and purposefully away from Michael.

This was something that Michael would normally ask about. He probably would’ve asked about it then if it wasn’t for some insolent waitress to break their uneasy air by bringing drinks to their table.

Jeremy waited for her to leave before letting his curiosity take hold of him, saying: “So um, what did you just say? What does it mean? *Seen-tah*?”

Michael snorted into his hand, calmed down, looked up at Jeremy, then muffled another fit of
laughter. “Nevermind. I don’t even know how you butchered that so hard, it's a five letter word.”

But Jeremy pouted. Michael deflected answering him, so Jeremy wanted to hang on, mostly to drag out some conversation.

‘Sinta’, and okay sure, Jeremy wanted an answer for the only thing that was out of place. He was a naturally curious person okay? And if this could be another possible installment to his book of Foreign Swears, then he wanted to know about it.


Michael pinched his nose bridge with his fingers and rolled his eyes. After a moment of hesitation, he looked up at Jeremy and said: “Fine. It means jackass.”

He scrunched his nose at Michael. “Rude.”

Nothing happened that night. Even afterwards, Jeremy couldn’t find the words to say, or how to say them.

He left the restaurant dripping with disappointment in himself, but he was pessimistic enough to not be surprised. Mission failed. He already expected it.

And yet, and yet, when they got back to Michael’s house, he still didn’t ask. Jeremy only managed to quiz him on what he thought about homecoming over *Sniper Elite V2*, to which Michael helpfully supplied: “I think it’s just a peppy person thing honestly. I don’t really get why everyone’s so excited”, which didn’t exactly inspire Jeremy’s confidence that he’d be willing to go.

He still didn’t ask if Michael wanted to go with him, hell, he didn’t even ask if Michael was going. He just assumed he was, Jeremy was pretty sure he overheard Chloe coaxing Michael into going to the mall with her at some point during Lunch today, and saying no to Chloe Valentine was basically saying no to the body of Christ.

But the night itself wasn’t anything special. In fact, it was completely not special, completely mundane and even a little forced. There was no pot and no kisses, and the atmosphere was just dull. Maybe that was what caused the awkward tension that stretched to the early morning hours.

It was weird. Jeremy didn’t like it. When he said he was hoping for something to be missing between them, this wasn’t what he meant. Throughout the night, he always felt like he had something to tell Michael, something on the tip of his tongue that he was on his tiptoes trying to avoid— and there was, sure, but he didn’t like how that affected the mood.

Well, he at least got to snuggle up with Michael when it finally came time for bed, which wrapped up the unusually lazy night pretty nicely. Jeremy had to pretend he was asleep first to get close to Michael, so yeah, it ripped the boy’s soul apart, but after that hurt dissipated, it sent him into a comfortable snooze.

(Plus, and he’ll never admit this to anyone: Jeremy was kind of afraid of the dark. When the lights go off and he can’t see anything, he feels alone. He slept with a night-light on until the sixth grade, when it burned out and Jeremy’s mom deemed it childish to buy him another.)
But cuddling up with Michael at night just gave him another reason to love him, Jeremy thought, because Michael was with him when he feels alone.

He’ll have to ask another time, that’s Jeremy’s resolution. The homecoming thing. He still wanted to do it, he just didn’t know how yet.
When Jeremy was younger, he used to have a lot of nightmares.

Vivid, terrifying and hyper-realistic nightmares. Nightmares that kept Jeremy at night shaking in his sheets.

He didn’t really know why, either. Nobody did. His mom thought maybe a therapist would have some answers, that maybe Jeremy had some uncovered PTSD to work through or was depressed, so she got him one to see every week.

But even after three months of treatment, that proved not to be the case. No changes.

Jeremy made no improvements, he kept waking up in cold sweats at three in the morning, kept crying until the Sun came up and kept going to school restless.

He stopped going to therapy, because really, the two-hundred-dollars-a-session pricepoint was really taking a toll on the Heere household and for what. Maybe if it was worth-while, he would’ve stayed, but no, so he bid sayonara to Miss Cuhna and hasn’t been to that clinic since.

Jeremy just had a lot of nightmares, he figured, prompting him to buy three dream catchers and a nightlight to help him sleep instead, just for some peace of mind.

Because it’s safe to say it’s harder getting some shut-eye when you’re threatened with a pretty high probability of waking up scared half to death. He needed them, he didn’t care that he was too old, it made him feel better.

Michael tried to help, too, because of course he did. Several sleepless nights followed by days where Jeremy showed up for class half-dead later, Michael noticed, and he wanted to intervene somehow.

Somehow took about three days to think up, but the resolve he’d proposed was for Jeremy to tell him every single dream or nightmare he had. Not really to stop them from happening, as he mentioned on the generic background of a Powerpoint template, but to help Michael understand him better, just so they could work through them together.

Jeremy thought it was a stupid idea, if he’s honest. He knew better then too than to get his hopes up over some super simple plan to kill what felt like an impossible force. But he appreciated Michael’s sentiment, then later, agreed to do it out of pure desperation.

(The question of why Michael spent at least two hours making a low-grade presentation to propose his solution— one that featured transitions and animation sequences— went unanswered that day.
Just for Jeremy’s entertainment, he assumed, because Michael could’ve said it plain and simple, but he didn’t.

Admittedly, Jeremy did get a kick out of it, so if that was the case, then mission accomplished. Plus, he admired the dedication Michael had to make a flowchart of nine different outcomes of his experiment, just for him)

There was something comforting about it too. The diligence and the long-burning zeal of their friendship, and just how so game Michael was to be there for him.

Whether that meant having to wake Michael up when they were together just to sheepishly ask him to sleep in the same bed, or one in the morning phone calls when they were apart, Michael was willing.

He was there for Jeremy when nobody else was, there to tell him that it was just a dream, that it was okay, that he’ll be okay; and as stupid as it sounded, Michael’s support really got Jeremy through the nightmares.

Then, and now, because even in their sophomore year, Jeremy still tells Michael about his dreams.

They don’t have to be nightmares (albeit, Jeremy still has a lot of those, a motif persisting past his childhood), they don’t even have to be the wacky or cool lucid dreams, Michael was just always there to listen.

It’s one of their, apparently now many, pacts. They’re each other’s dream journals: Michael told Jeremy everything, and in turn, Jeremy told Michael everything. To them, it was just another thing they talked about, like paintball or vintage sports cards.

Jeremy dreamt Monday night. But when he woke up on Tuesday, wide-eyed and gawking, he knew this wasn’t a dream he could tell Michael about.

He wasn’t shaking in his sheets because of a nightmare, it’d just felt like one.

In his dream, Jeremy wakes up in a bed with eight pillows and a cozy, sunken mattress.

It’s a soft start to a day. He flutters his eyes awake, blinks in his surroundings, and yawns. He doesn’t want to get up just yet, so he cradles his arms tightly against the pillow he’s cuddling, and presses his head deeper into the padding.

In his dream, there’s only four pillows he can feel against his skin.

There’s one stuffed underneath the blankets at the ball of his foot, there’s two sloping his head up against the headboard, and then there’s that larger, fluffed pillow he’s snuggling up against.

It's a long pillow too, a warm, white pillow that Jeremy’s legs were wrapped around.

He’s apparently in a room too, and as his sleepy haze dissipates, he watches the subdued blue blobs morph into shapely furniture, and the brown smudge in the far corner mature into a thin wardrobe.

It looks like a homely room, though it definitely isn’t his room. This one is much cleaner, but it still feels familiar.

In his life, he’s woken up in Michael’s bed so many that he doesn’t really think twice about it anymore. It’s second nature— never really disorienting—to just consider it home, and sometimes, Jeremy thinks he’s in his own bed up until he sees Michael’s mom out in the hallway. They’re not
similar, it’s just that Jeremy’s used to both.

But this isn’t he or Michael’s room.

It has a pretty, pastel colour palette, donning complementary paintings and long windows, with curtains stretching just far enough to allow the right amount of light to peak in.

He assumes it’s morning, then, by the tone of the light. It isn’t necessarily orange or pink, it’s a bright, early yellow-white colour. It casts down on the carpet, across Jeremy’s pale skin, then fell short on a tan blur in the corner of his eye.

The room reminds Jeremy a lot of a hotel. It smells like a hotel, too. If he had to guess, it’s a lot like that hotel he and Michael roomed together in during their eighth grade trip to Quebec.

It’d been a nice trip, they’d gone snowboarding on the second day and, if he recalls correctly, Michael got sick on the third.

(He did not stop making fun of Michael for catching a cold. He wouldn’t usually, but since Michael had made a bunch of snotty comments about how Jeremy had basically brought a parka on the trip the day prior, he wanted revenge.

It was Michael’s fault, he decided to wear a pretty thin jacket that definitely wasn’t designed for Canadian alpines. It didn’t hurt to rub karma in his face just a little.

Then, Jeremy got sick on the fourth day. He blamed Michael.)

He notices there’s tapping, some repetitive, some very annoying prodding on his forehead, so he rolls his eyes and tilts his chin just a little upwards, and watches as the soft, white pillow he was cuddling melt away into a tan body with a hard chest.

“Michael?” Jeremy murmurs softly, blinking. He isn’t surprised he’s here.

(If he wasn’t dreaming, then maybe he’d ask what the fuck are you doing here. or, did you hack into my dreams? — but he wasn’t conscious enough to think that)

Michael’s breathing is slow, but he’s looking at Jeremy, his hand slowly caressing up Jeremy’s neck from his back and into his spindly hair.

“Yea, sinta?” he mutters back, tousling with his curls. Jeremy feels his heart leap into his throat, but he doesn’t feel the urge to push it down this time.

“I love you.” Jeremy hums, then: “Just so you know that.”

Jeremy sees a half-second of that slight, signature smirk on Michael’s lips before they’re pressed against Jeremy’s. A heavenly kiss, one that isn’t prefaced with ‘no homo’, one that isn’t in a five-metre radius of his screenplay, and one that maybe feels real.

“I love you too.” Michael says, but that doesn’t feel like that’s some life-changing declaration of love. It feels like a fact.

It’s just something that’s true. Like how the Bible is the most quoted text of all time or how Fahrenheit is a lousy (and confusing) excuse for a temperature unit.

It’s just something about Michael, too. It’s something that just added into the melting pot of everything that made up Michael. Michael is Filipino. Michael enjoys paintball. Michael hates it
when people hum over his music. Michael loves Jeremy.

It trickled into another slow kiss. A kiss that feels a lot like home, that feels a lot like it _should_ happen. *This is right, there’s nothing wrong with this*, and Jeremy doesn’t have to convince himself that, he just knows it.

*(God, how he wished this wasn’t a dream)*

But dream-Jeremy doesn’t know that this isn’t real yet. He doesn’t know that Michael is just a projection, that this is all a feverdream. It’s all very simple to dream-Jeremy, because this is dream-Jeremy’s life. He’s ignorant, and he wants to live in this warm glow forever.

He can feel Michael’s hand gravitate towards his jaw, tipping his chin just a little higher for some better access. Jeremy easily complies physically, but lets out a dulcet whine.

Kiss bled into kiss, leaving room little breathers in between for their noses to bump. With every peck, the chaste kisses became hungrier and hungrier, until Jeremy starts writhing around and deems their sweet cuddly position outdated, rolling himself on top of Michael, pupils blown.

Hips connected to Michael’s abdomen, Jeremy leans down and continues his reign of terror, clawing needily as Michael readjusts himself, pushing his own back against the headboard.

He realizes Michael’s ginger touch has turned to husky hands set on his hips, and as Jeremy pushes Michael’s head against the wall and deepens their kiss, he notices a low, guttural sound escape Michael’s throat.

“I didn’t know you’d want to do this so early in the morning.” Michael quips, dragging his hand under Jeremy’s waistband and pulling it down just an inch to tease. His mouth got progressively more aggressive, overturning Jeremy’s spit-slicked lips between his teeth and gently nibbling on the flesh there, earning a couple of soft whimpers from the other boy.

“You have your ways,” Jeremy mutters back, pausing for just a small break to take off his shirt.

*His* hands, unlike Michael’s greedy ones, gently card through black hair, rubbing down a tan neck and a firm décolletage.

God, *this boy*, he thinks. *This boy*.

Michael groans into their next kiss. Maybe it’s because of how Jeremy cheekily misplaced his thigh to bring some attention to his crotch, maybe it’s how he pushed onto Michael’s chest or ran his hands through Michael’s hair.

“You wanna play dirty?” Michael murmurs into his ear, teeth grazing against the pink skin. Jeremy whines, and rubs against him for contact. “Fine, then.”

In one practiced, frenetic motion, Michael throws his weight against Jeremy and knocks him down onto the covers, climbing on top of his pale body with both his hands tying down Jeremy’s wrists and a hot lust in his eyes.

Jeremy swallows in suspense, feeling blood rush down. His spine tingles, his heart flips, his body is on fire, and all he wants is _more_.

But, it’s the last thing he sees before he woke up. He knew, it was too good to be true, he can’t have more.
But his dream still took a toll on Jeremy. He woke up in a dark room with his back arched off his bed, heat ghosting his skin, and with Michael’s name was fresh on his lips.

So Jeremy didn’t have time to think twice, Jeremy didn’t have time to stop himself. He wanted more, please, that’s all he wanted, and fuck, if he had to do it himself, then so be it.

His rules were obsolete, his self-control went missing, and the fire running south his chest rendered silly things like his LAWS and BARRIERS defunct, just in his search for more.

His hand reached for himself, and he burrowed into hot rolls of pleasure, trying to make himself whole, trying to find that warm glow again—

Jeremy came silently, in shallow, hitched gasps, chest heaving. His pillowcase had a new tear in it from gripping so hard.

So much for not letting it happen again.

---

Tuesday morning’s shame dissipated quicker this time. Quicker than he expected it to, judging by how gut-wrenched and ruined he felt after the first instance.

This— the reason why it was so much easier to get over this time— was a mystery.

Maybe it was because he didn’t use a real image of Michael? Because it was a dream that started it?

It wasn’t Jeremy’s choice to think about him, what he dreamed about wasn’t in his control, and dream-Michael wasn’t real-Michael.

It’s a valid point.

Maybe he was just more blasé with time passing. The shock value went down, or he already knew how gross and depraved he could get. That’s another reason, another possibility.

Or maybe it was because this time around, he didn’t have the option to ignore Michael and run away from his problems. If he’d started neglecting Michael again, Michael would probably kill him, so Jeremy had to learn to face them a little more head on, leading to heart-stopping smiles, red-faces, and a heavy weight of guilt following him around the halls.

That was probably the reason. Or maybe it was an amalgamation of the three.

Either way, it doesn’t really matter why. What matters is that the universe, by some trick of the gods, had enough mercy on him, and he was grateful.

On Wednesday, it still stung whenever he spoke to Michael, but at least he was able to speak to Michael.

Things were still in routine. Life was still good.

“So how’s the move going?” Jeremy asked quietly, while Ms Harper preoccupied herself with telling some other kid off. Jeremy was pretty sure his name was Ian, the same dick from their History class.
Michael shrugged, trying to balance a pencil on his index finger and practically ignoring his sixteen unanswered homework questions beneath it. “It’s been going good I guess, my dad kind of pulled his back yesterday, but it’s cool.”

Honestly, it’s not really surprising, Michael’s dad was essentially a paunchy hypochondriac with early onset arthritis. Jeremy didn’t remember a time where he wasn’t complaining about a twisted ankle or cold.

Still, he was a little concerned, and let’s face it, afterschool nights without anyone to hang out with got fucking boring. Summer was enough torment, Jeremy’s had enough ‘me time’ to last a lifetime.

Though, he did hang out with Jake and Jenna on Tuesday, but that was just for a group project, which he was proud of. He got out of the house, even if it was only for forty-five minutes. They met at a Sbarro just for some extra brainstorming time and pizza.

Jeremy tilted his head. “You guys need any help?”

“Mmn, well, you don’t have to, but I’d like the company.” Michael mused. “Tonight me and my dad are just gonna hang out, but tomorrow you can come. We’re mostly just unpacking now but ugh, it’s too boring y’feel?”

Jeremy noticed his fingers twiddling with his ruler and his leg bouncing against the bottom half of his desk.

It was six minutes until the bell rang, so he probably wanted to just get out and have those sweet five minutes of salvation to listen to music before next class. Jeremy shared the sentiment.

“Really selling the gig here Mike.” Jeremy said. “But sure. It’s not like I have anywhere else to be.”

Michael smiled, then squinted at him. “‘m sure you have tons of places to be. You’re Jeremy Heere, you’re popular now.”

He chuckled, punched Michael in the arm playfully, and let his hand doodle absentmindedly in the margins of his notes. “Michael, be serious. What else do I do?”

“Er, huh. You jack off, I imagine.”

He sucked in a breath, feeling a sick heat rise from his abdomen up his chest. It’s only a reminder, despite the levity, of Tuesday morning, and that one Saturday night.

God, and why did Michael have to say ‘I imagine’? Jeremy’s apparently dysfunctional brain has taken that completely out of context already.

There was nothing wrong with what he said, at all. Saying jabs like that in a smug voice was just something Michael did. That’s totally normal banter for best friends and he should not want it to be taken literally.

Jeremy Heere is a mess. A mess who panics at the slightest change of wind. A mess with a mind constantly in the gutter— only proving Michael’s point just a little more, but Jeremy didn’t really care about that anymore.

He hoped those play rehearsals paid off, because while Jeremy attempted an eyeroll, he was pretty sure it looked more like he had something in his eye. Great.
He’ll never really know if Michael was convinced. Or if he noticed the splotchy red blush crawling up his neck or if he felt the air thicken after Jeremy’s abrupt silence.

“So… are we good for tomorrow?”

Saved by the bell. Jeremy nodded, flushed, half-assed their handshake and a goodbye, then walked out of class a little too quickly.

He realized moments later that he probably looked like an idiot doing it. Michael was probably used to that from him, though.

By Thursday, the word ‘Sinta’ hung itself up in a picture frame in Jeremy’s head, as if he didn’t have enough things on his brain already. He’s in complete and utter turmoil.

But, like most words that Jeremy forces Michael to translate for him, he added it to his book of Foreign Swears, and started using it in his regular vocabulary. Sinta. Jackass.

But here’s the thing, there’s something about sinta that makes it different. Jeremy noticed its effect on Monday, when, after Rich stole his backpack and tried to vandalize it with Sharpie’d penises (leading to a high-speed hallway chase at Lunch), he called him it.

And in the midst of their pursuit, Michael froze, just for a couple of seconds, before the slight vein under Michael’s hair popped out. He grabbed the bag from Rich soundlessly, then handed it back to Jeremy.

Sinta was special, someway, somehow. It’s been days and the word’s still itching away at him.

See, under any other circumstance, it’d die off quickly. Jeremy would forget about it, then he’d use the next foreign word that Michael graced him with for about three days, and repeat. It’s been like this for years. Perks of having a bilingual (technically trilingual, as Michael sort of speaks Spanish) best friend.

Jeremy thought, after Monday, that maybe he just pronounced it wrong, but Michael didn’t correct him, and he was pretty sure he was saying it right.

So Jeremy called Michael jackass whenever he stole one of the sticks in Jeremy’s Kit-Kat, or that time where Michael accidentally closed a locker door on Jeremy’s fingers, or when he skipped class to hang out during Jeremy’s study hall.

Of course, he couldn’t work it into conversation too much, that’d be suspicious, but almost every time Jeremy said it, Michael would pause, suck in a breath, relapse, then stammer, and Michael never stammered.

So Jeremy didn’t let sinta leave his vocabulary just yet. It stuck with him because it had some weird effect on Michael, and he wanted answers.

Soon. Jeremy couldn’t get them just yet because he didn’t have enough evidence. Michael’s pauses or his wide-eyes after Jeremy mentions it? He could just be hallucinating those, making something out of nothing. He’ll observe for now, and if it keeps happening, then he’ll bring it up.
Moving Thursday afterschool went better than expected. Two trips from the apartment to the new house and thirteen Sellotape’d boxes later, the boys could finally get to work unpacking.

The second car ride was pretty silent. Jeremy was damned to the back and his spindly knees pressed uncomfortably against the too close driver seat, but Michael shotgunned. He was taller, and Jeremy’s always found talking to Mr Mell a little awkward, anyways.

Jeremy really didn’t know what else to bring up that was new other than the divorce, so he stayed quiet while he and Michael seldomly chatted in the front. It didn’t bug him, he just wished Mr Mell would pull his seat up a little closer to the wheel.

He sat with a smaller crate on his lap. It was a pretty tight fit, and there was an edge of another box digging into his side— since the SUV could only hold so much, it was pretty cramped— but Jeremy resolved that by leaning against the door. At least they got the last of them.

So they pulled into the driveway, and by then, both of Jeremy’s feet were asleep, so he struggled getting out of the car. They were like dead weights, anchors, and he almost tripped twice balancing himself and the small (but apparently heavier than expected) box.

“Could you go unlock the door, Jeremy?” Mr Mell asked. It’s not really a question, but he treated it like one, nodding as Mr Mell lifted up the trunk of his car, then lended a set of keys into Jeremy’s free hand.

He squinted at the keyring. There was about twenty different keys on it: some small, others large, some metal, others decorated in light blue stripes or the logo for the New Jersey Devils. Jeremy figured he got it made in one of those key-making machines at Walmart.

On it was also a small, rectangular keychain too, with a backdrop of some tropical vacation. The text is Spanish, but Jeremy assumed it says something cheesy, like ‘Wish You Were Here’ or something moot like that. “It’s the square one. Silver.”

Jeremy swept up the right key and skipped up the porch. From what he could tell, the neighbourhood was quaint, kind of tiny, but the house was big. Something more out in the countryside, more quiet, since Jeremy was pretty sure this was where all the old retirees lived.

Either way. It’s an empty house. Sort of. There’s no furniture yet, just boxes, but there’s a lot of boxes. Jeremy added to the pile in what looked like a den-to-be before running back outside.

It’s not the most amount of work, but after they brought everything from the car into the living room, it was time to start unpacking, and Jeremy’s spine was already starting to ache a little.

“Hey Jer, Mike, could you bring these into the basement?” Mr Mell ordered, nudging his head to a particular three stack. In black marker, each one read ‘B/M’. Good, because Jeremy had no clue which ‘these’ he was referring to in the knee-deep swamp of boxes.

Jeremy nodded. Again, it wasn’t really a question, but that was just Mr Mell’s nature. He grabbed the box on top and left the other two for Michael, making sure to make a face at him as he passed.

There were only two other boxes already in the basement when he got down there. Jeremy’s never seen it before, but it was at least it looked finished.
Michael’s mom’s house had a plain downstairs that apparently has been under renovation for over a decade, with walls baring insulation, a frizzy carpet and dingy lights.

But this one was going to take some getting used to. It had this new basement smell and was completely stripped of any personality.

“Don’t worry, I basically already reserved this for us.” Michael, an apparent psychic, said. “Dad knows that already.”

Jeremy’s lips quirked into a smile. He set down the box, rubbed down his back, then turned over to Michael, who was doing the same. “Does that mean we have to go to Spencer’s soon?”

Michael chuckled, walked a little closer, and rolled his eyes—flicking some torn piece of tape off his fingers. “You don’t seem enthused about that.”

He huffed a laugh, and he tried to shake off his nerves as Michael got closer. To little avail, Jeremy found out.

“Ugh, every time you drag me in there you talk to that Eugene kid for like, an hour.” Jeremy dragged, but his voice definitely cracked when he noticed that there was something different in Michael’s eyes. He just couldn’t pinpoint what.

“Jealous?” Michael snickered, and as Jeremy was nervously backing up, he accidentally knocked over the top half of a two-box stack.

Michael laughed dryly, then shrugged. “I hope there wasn’t anything fragile in there.”

Jeremy tried to laugh back, he really did—even something like a measly chortle would’ve given some gaiety to the situation—but he was more focused on how his back had hit the banister, and Michael was still stepping closer.

Something in him was excited. A nervous thrill that made him feel weightless and light-headed, that had him running on frayed nerves and an abnormally fast heartbeat, that made him squeak when Michael’s chest was about an inch away from his own.

“Sinta,” Jeremy seethed, ignoring the thumping in his ears. It’s the only thing he said because God, finding words was difficult enough, but trying to get them out was even harder.

Given the contextual clues, given his dizziness, the spark in Michael’s eyes and the churn of anticipation in his gut, Jeremy sort of expected it to happen, and, on some self-destructive level, he wanted it to. That didn’t necessarily mean he was prepared for it.

Michael stepped closer, and eagerly closed the gap between them. And even though he wasn’t prepared for it, Jeremy didn’t let himself freeze this time.

While Michael’s left hand adjusted the angle between them by tilting his jaw to the side, Jeremy’s arms wrapped around Michael’s collar and tugged him closer.

After the first week, Jeremy learned a thing or two about what Michael likes him doing.

Jeremy knew that brushing his fingers against Michael’s neck gave him chills, he knew that certain noises made him a little more aggressive (albeit, Jeremy was a little too shy to purposefully make noises, so he didn't often), and he knew that he definitely wasn’t getting over Michael soon.

Still, twelve-or-so kisses later, the sick high Jeremy gets whenever they practiced was still killing
him. You’d think that the thrill would’ve died down by now, but no, it never got easier. Jeremy always found himself wanting more, and he always hated himself for that.

They parted. The kiss had been slow, gentle enough, and didn’t go too deep. It was sweet, and if Jeremy’s life wasn’t so upended by it, he might’ve actually described it as pleasant.

“Where’d you learn that?” Michael asked.

It took a few seconds of blinking to gather his bearings, and to make sense of Michael’s question.

“Oh, um, you—you said it the other night.” Jeremy said, trying to train his features and hide his blush by turning his eyes downcast.

But they were so close that looking down wasn’t the best decision—you know, Michael might find it weird if Jeremy just stared intently at his crotch—so instead he pointedly focused on the piece of wall behind Michael.

Michael hummed in acknowledgement; the mirth in his eyes assured him that yes, he noticed how Jeremy averted his eyes, and where from. There wasn’t anywhere much else to look.

And apparently, he didn’t want there to be. Michael tilted Jeremy’s chin up with ginger fingers until their eyes met. “Hey.”

Jeremy snorted, adding some much-needed levity. “What?”

“I was gonna ask earlier, but d’you think you’re going to ho-co? I think I’m gonna, but it’d be weird showing up alone.” said Michael, in a voice too tender for their compromising position. He couldn’t imagine what it’d be like if Mr Mell just walked downstairs and saw them like this.

The thought didn’t help his already intense blush. Jeremy swallowed nervously. “Um, y—yeah, ‘ve been thinking the same thing. Brooke made me buy a suit so I guess I have to go either way, right?”

He tried to school down the growing excitement in his voice—he didn’t know if he succeeded, but by the tapered, tense smile that Michael gave him, it didn’t seem to matter. He must be a little nervous too. “Great, me too. Just didn’t know how to ask without making it weird.”

_So to not make it weird, you kiss me first._ Jeremy thought, rolling his eyes. _Impeccable logic, Micah._

But he didn’t say that, instead, he just admitted: “Me neither.”

“Right on. So, Friday?” Michael asked.

Jeremy dragged his fingers across the fabric of Michael’s grey _Breaking Bad_ hoodie. His red one probably needed a wash, he figured, or maybe he just didn’t want to get it dirtied by all the dust in here.

The stim was memorizing, so memorizing that Jeremy almost forgot to nod.

But in the brief moment that followed, a comfortable silence stretched between them, where Jeremy’s back was against the wall, with a hand on his waist, his arms wrapped around Michael’s neck, and a soft smile fixed on his face. They were bound at the hip, like always, just in a different way.
Then Jeremy heedily pulled Michael in, stealing another kiss because *he can*. He bit down his antsy panic in favour of his selfishness.

It’s hard sometimes, being taunted, being this close but so far to someone you love— and sometimes, Jeremy forgets he isn’t Michael’s.

It’s easy to forget that, between eleven years of knowing each other, flirty dialogue and… activities like *these*, Jeremy found himself in a limbo where romantic acts and platonic intentions blended together. It’s confusing.

He wasn’t sure if that was good or not.

A part of him loved this. A part of him wanted this, wanted to be as close as possible to Michael without hurting their life-long bond, wanted to taste him and feel him without change.

But another part of Jeremy…

… well, that part doesn’t matter. It shouldn’t.

It doesn’t matter if *IT HURTS*. They’re still best friends, and that’s what matters. So what if they do coupley stuff? They’re on a mutual understanding that this is for Jeremy’s stage fright, that Michael is just helping him out, that this isn’t real.

*It’s just a kiss, it’s just a kiss.* Jeremy repeated to himself. It became a mantra, a gospel, something he’s trying to believe in himself. He’s trying to push down the sickness, be rational and in tune with coherent reality. The mantra is fast, panicky, and was interrupted by an occasional: *It doesn’t really matter. This is normal for us.*

Because they’re Michael and Jeremy, and apparently, this is something they do now. They’re so close that they can do these things and it’s *normal*. Regretable, but normal, right?

But he couldn’t ignore the other voice, telling him that this wasn’t how it should happen.

This should be different. They shouldn’t be *fake* kissing, and *Jeremy* shouldn’t be getting relief out of this. Kissing is something couples do. It’s a sign of relationships and intimacy and *love*, and Jeremy didn’t know how Michael thought otherwise.

They shouldn’t be doing it like *this*. They shouldn’t be doing this for Madeline, for rehearsal practice, for some gimmicky Valentine’s Day play at their high-school.

People kiss because they love each other. So why did this have to be an exception?

Jeremy tried to ignore the painful stir in his abdomen, the thrumming in his chest, the soft whines that he forwarded into the kiss accidentally.

He tried to ignore how he liked this, above all. He shouldn’t like this, because this was wrong. This was just exploiting Michael for his good heart.

*This cannot keep happening.* Jeremy thought, *Everytime you wind up here, the ice just feels thinner and thinner.*

But he still melted into it, he still was putty in Michael’s hands, and God knows, he still wanted this. He’s gross, he knows that, so sue him for falling in love, for fighting a fight he can’t win.

“Michael! Jeremy! Stop slacking and get back up here!”
Mr Mell cut their kiss short. Jeremy was almost disappointed.

Seeing Michael as they separated stirred that expected, but dreaded burn. It’s expected, familiar, because it happens all the time after they kiss. It ruins Jeremy, it seeps into his bones and unsettles him to the core, reminding him of just how greedy he was to do this.

Jeremy thought, by how intently Michael was looking at him, with his brows crossed and that concerned gleam in his eye, that maybe he started crying.

But no, after Michael lightly pecked him again and started walking towards the stairs, Jeremy touched up his face with his fingers.

Dry— and his skin was laughably flushed, if the fever-hot temperatures were anything to go by.

He gulped, then silently wondered what Michael was thinking about as he followed him up the stairs.

You’d think that with all the heart-burning adrenaline he feels from ‘practicing’, that eventually he’d learn to stop overthinking it and calm down.

Nope. But that didn’t matter. They went back to moving boxes and nostalgia trips like nothing weird ever happened.

Because it didn’t, not to Michael, and definitely not to Jeremy.

Nothing happened. Kissing was nothing, and 'nothing' continued to happen, in unfurbished closets and behind staircases, under Mr Mell's nose.

Chapter End Notes

i hate complaining about my writing skills publicly but i feel like i've plateaued a lot in this story like my writing isn't resounding or good really, idk ;/ sometimes i feel like i get repetitive, so please, leave some constructive criticism in the comments, i really wanna get better and make this story good again. i've legit almost deleted it like nine times already haha
Being the nervous wreck that he is and always has been, Jeremy Heere didn’t exactly expect to ever say yes to a high-school party.

Homecoming? Sure, he’s a little nervous, but he’ll go, since other people wanted him there, and well, there also wasn’t much danger in taking that risk anyways.

There’s nothing—at least, not much—that could harm him at a semi-formal dance, other than judgmental teachers and hilariously bad dancing.

But then word came out about a party. An actual party, where there would be booze and weed and other people, and well, he panicked.

So long story short, that’s exactly what he agreed to go to on Tuesday at Lunch, after news that Jake’s-friend’s-brother’s-something was apparently throwing a post-homecoming bash made rounds to their table.

Jeremy thought he’d be off the hook. He was new after all, hardly popular, a Make-A-Wish case, still kind-of-a-loser, right?

Nope, wrong, apparently anyone who had connection to Jake Dillinger was invited, and almost expected to go. Unfortunately, that scope included Jeremy.

To be fair, it’d been a hesitant yes. A yes that took about five minutes worth of panicked debate and a promise to get wasted.

Tuesday. Lunch. After everyone else had agreed— Brooke, Chloe, Jenna, Rich— the focus landed on him and Michael, who, then, were the only two who hadn’t said anything.

They’d shared an uneasy, knowing glance, reading: ’should we?’, a tacit gesture in their antisocial brotherhood, and that got Jeremy thinking.
Neither of them have ever been to a party before, and they've really only known these people for like two weeks, so maybe yeah, it wasn’t the safest bet to go.

There were dangers out there, like hard drugs and sex-crazy teenagers, and coming from a very secluded, bullied corner in the high-school hierarchy, Jeremy wasn’t exactly sure if he and Michael could trust them.

And well, Jeremy could swallow his pride enough to admit that he was a little scared. They were new to this scene, okay? It was like being an unsuspectingnelk at a table of lions.

They were the popular kids, the socialites, the plastics— in Mean Girls terms— they were the demi-gods that everyone else looked up to, and frankly, once Jeremy actually thought about it, he realized that this could very well be a prank.

The last fortnight could’ve just been the stage one of some well thought-out and elaborate scheme to mortify the losers. Make them think they were cool, then destroy them.

Jeremy frowned at that. They seemed too nice, but maybe they were just trying to finagle their trust. Maybe they were just all acting this way so it could pan out into one stupid joke and make them look like idiots.

Honestly, it sounded like a plan too complex for popular people, but Jeremy’s anxiety didn’t take anything for face value. Plus, some of these people have bullied him in the past. His worries weren’t based off nothing.

Under the scrutiny, he’d sunk into his seat anxiously and looked to Michael for reassurance. He seemed to be mulling over the idea, too, maybe realizing that going to the afterparty would probably be the biggest mistake in their high-school careers.

But then again, maybe not. Because Michael rubbed down Jeremy’s hand, and his features softened, teeming a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

‘Maybe we should go’, it said, sotto voce. His head nudged towards the others.

Jeremy crossed his eyebrows, dubiously. He got Michael’s hint, but he was still skeptical. Of course he was, why wouldn’t he be? These people, they’ve taken them under their wing, sure, they complimented him and took him out on a trip to the mall, yes, asked to hang out, and…

Okay, maybe Jeremy didn’t have a reason to not trust them anymore. Since sophomore year began, they’ve been nothing but welcoming, it was just him. He just couldn’t shake his cynicism.

But Michael wanted to try it. Go, see if there’s a good time to be had, and experiment. He just wanted Jeremy’s confirmation before saying yes, because they do everything as a team.

Hell, it’s hard to say no to an offer like that.

It’s weird though, how Michael wanted to go to a party. That was totally unlike him. Michael’s outright said a couple of times that he too, was skeptical of these new popular kids in their friend group. Maybe he just had a liking for Jake.

Jeremy didn’t know how to feel about that possibility, but Jake’s dating Chloe anyways, so he’s in the clear from any heartbreak for now.

Either way, Jeremy should go, right? Maybe it’ll be fun, and if it isn’t, then well, Michael has his back. Because they’re actual friends, and have been for eleven years. Because they do these things
“S— sure.” said Jeremy, shifting his eyes off Michael and towards the rest of the table.

Rich’s eyes lit up like Christmas morning; ecstatic. That couldn’t be a good sign.

Freshman Jeremy would never expect that he’d actually go to homecoming, let alone be excited for it.

Well, excited was a loose term here. On some level, Jeremy was kind of happy to finally go to something like a semi-formal.

He’s, of course, never been to it before, and he felt like it’s a part of teenage life that was important, an experience—if you want to use the Christine Canigula dictionary—that Jeremy didn’t want to miss out on. That, if he didn’t go, maybe he’d regret it years down the line.

There’s other feelings there though. Some are bubbly, afraid, some are bored of this already, some are antsy and some are wondering why the hell he’s getting so worked up for something like homecoming.

And while yes, he’s happy that he decided to go, there’s still some part of him sixty-five percent sure that it’ll be a massive trainwreck and he won’t have a good time. But that’s just his social anxiety-stirred pessimism talking, probably.

After talking it up, after wasting Chloe and Brooke’s time at the mall, after buying a suit and saying yes to Michael, he couldn’t just not go anymore. He was way too deep in to pull out.

This was something he committed to, whether he liked it or not.

And besides, what’s the worst that could happen?

(Nevermind. Jeremy did not want to think about that)

Getting ready turned out to be challenging.

Not objectively speaking, of course. Jeremy had no problem showering, or styling his hair just so his waves were coiffed into the right swoop (which took more time perfecting than he’d like to admit), or dressing up in a suit, something he’s never done alone before.

No, none of that was challenging, per se. Time-consuming yes, without his mother there to help him out anymore, but not difficult.

What was challenging was getting his mind off Michael. That, that was harder than he expected.

Attraction was really, just a detriment. His thoughts just kept wandering, and wandering. Wondering what Michael was wearing, what Michael was doing, what Michael was thinking— was
Michael as nervous as he was? Probably not, but it’s questions like those that kept spacing Jeremy out.

Sometimes he caught himself staring plaintively at his phone, tempted to ask Michael what his outfit looked like. He hasn’t seen anything yet, since they’d both agreed that it’d be fun to leave it a surprise.

God, it took three stupidly long pep-talks in the mirror to convince himself that Michael didn’t matter right now. It’s homecoming, and Jeremy’s going to have fun, with or without Michael. Jeremy shouldn’t be worried about him, what Michael will think or what Michael will do or if he’ll dance or what will happen.

Nothing’s going to happen, there’s no threat of anything happening, so there’s no reason to be anxious about tonight. He’ll do great. Jeremy will keep on the perimeter of the auditorium and make ironic comments about how bad some people dance, while refusing to dance himself.

Then he’ll have a few drinks at that afterparty, call a cab or hitch a ride to Michael’s house, where they’ll pass out on the basement couch, probably still half-dressed in their suits. They’ll be dead on their feet and nothing will happen there, either.

Nothing will happen, what would happen anyways?

Actually no. Don’t think about that. Because there’s no reason to worry. So don’t think up a reason, there’s no point in sitting on the endless possibilities.

He’s fine.

“I’m fine.” Sort of. Michael was still there, rattling around in his head, but he’s been reduced to a low hum, not a loud clash. Jeremy could almost phase him out, and he wanted to.

God, he so wanted to. Jeremy didn’t want to think about him right now.

He wanted nothing to do with the thought of his impending doom or just how nervous he was—not just for homecoming, but now because of the afterparty, too.

Jeremy’s never really been to one of those, mind you, he’s never even been to a regular party before, but maybe it’ll be fun. He’s praying on that.

Jeremy might have a few drinks, or maybe a lot of drinks—assuming there’s alcohol (which is like, duh, they’re teenagers, that’s basically a given) — since he’s never really been drunk-drunk before. Just tipsy-drunk off a couple cans of his dad’s beer one time during the summer.

It’s nerve wracking, because he wants to drink, given this chance, but what if he does something stupid? Or what if he’s bad at drinking? Beer already tasted so gross, and he heard that shots burn. He’ll probably spit it out, and that’s apparently something teenagers made fun of other teenagers for, if the high-school drama movies are correct.

So, to soothe his anxiety, he shook his hand awake and pressed open the Spotify app, straying away from he and Michael’s shared ‘chill music’ playlist and instead turned on some old band he used to like.

They had catchy songs, ones Jeremy loved in the ninth grade, but after the first five-hundred plays, started to get repetitive. Still, it was nice to revisit once and a while, really helps him unwind to just sit back and sing along to some good old nostalgic tunes.
Huh, Michael used to sing this one with me. I’m pretty sure it’s the only song he liked.

Then, You’re supposed to not be thinking about him right now.

Homecoming was in just a few hours and well, thinking about Michael was only going to make Jeremy more anxious. It shouldn’t, but it does.

That’s what love did to you, Jeremy guessed. Your life just became a clutter, a mess, torn apart by the slightest gust of wind, but somehow, you’re still happy about it.

Love, Jeremy figured, didn’t have to be returned to be brilliant.

Although, it would’ve been great if it had been.

Okay, Jeremy still hated the fact that he loved Michael. That apparently was a constant, something that never changed in his ever-turning whirlpool of emotions—or at least not yet it didn’t.

But Jeremy still didn’t want to feel this way about him. He accepted that he fell in love, he knew that yeah, there wasn’t anything he could do about it, but sometimes, he wanted everything to just go back to normal.

But that begged the question, what was normal? He didn’t really know what normal was anymore. Normal seemed so long ago, so distant—at what point was Jeremy normal?


And if so, then why would anyone want to be normal?

Has Jeremy ever been normal?

God dammit, he’s thinking again. He needed to stop that, he needed to take a couple of deep breaths, and search up how to tie a tie and reapply some deodorant. That was important right now, trivial things like emotions did not.

For a used pair that weren’t even going to be his in another week, the shoes were nice.

His dad had to whip out their shoe-shining sponge, but after they were polished, they looked good as new, and surprisingly—despite Jeremy’s personal doubts—matched his outfit well.

He reminded himself to say another ‘thank you’ to Chloe and Brooke, the apparent fashion goddesses amongst the casual plebeians at Middleborough who knew where to get a good deal.

Jeremy kind of preferred renting out used shoes. He didn’t even know about it before their trip to the mall, but this way, he didn’t have to deal with a too-firm-a-toe or the worry about damaging them. They were worn soft by their previous owners, and the value’s already gone down just by
having a ‘used’ tag. Jeremy didn’t really see a downside.

He’s been enlightened in the art of leasing. Why would he ever buy loafers again? He only ever needed them for specific events, and they were pricey shoes that needed commitment.

Feeling proud of how far his bunny-ears technique has come, Jeremy straightened his back out.

“Jeremy! I think Michael’s here!” Mr Heere called, Jeremy yelled back a muffed noise that sort of sounded like “Coming!”

Good enough. He had Michael’s boutonnière grit between his teeth as he buttoned up the middle two hooks on his suit jacket.

Yup, he and Michael were trading boutonnieres— like they were going as a couple. To be fair, Christine said that she and Brooke were doing the same thing with their corsages, so it wasn’t really weird. Other people were doing it, it’s okay.

So, all Jeremy knew about Michael’s outfit was that there was red in it. Or at least a colour that went well with red. Or that Michael is an idiot who just likes red, because you’re supposed to get a boutonnière that matches your outfit. Jake told him that, so it must be true. He asked Michael for a blue one, and Michael specified red in return.

Either way, it was Michael’s lost, so Jeremy trundled down the stairs after deciding that two done-up buttons looked the best.

It still showed off the white dress shirt, complimented the length of his tie (which his dad had to help fix for him, he’d made the knot too big), and still left a little wiggle-room in the hips.

In fact, the entire jacket had a little too much wiggle-room. It hung off his shoulders, but was comfortable enough to where it didn’t really matter. The shirt hugged his frame, which he liked.

Chloe said that, since he’s keeping it, he’ll probably eventually grow into the blazer. That’d just take some time, so maybe he could rewear it to prom.

For now, it still looked good. The depot didn’t have the widest size variety, and he had to roll up the cuffs so they didn’t hang down to his mid-palm. He also probably couldn’t wear this without a trusty belt.

It’s brown (faux) leather. Matches the loafers, he supposed when he bought them, but now they just looked like two completely different shades.

Jeremy hoped it was just the lighting, this was the one night he actually cared about how he looked, so he better be damn good at it.

The den was dim, unlit by any artificial LEDs, and since it was six o’clock in October, the Sun was already setting outside.

Through the bay window, Jeremy could see two bright yellow cones shafting through the living room. Jeremy drew in a breath, counted to four, then exhaled. Ms Langit’s car was outside, Michael was here.

Then the doorbell rang.

Jeremy didn’t know what he was expecting. Maybe he was just praying on the last straw, maybe he was under the impression that Michael was a no-show, that he didn’t have to do this anymore.
But no, he was here, and Jeremy still had to go to homecoming. The *ding!* was just the confirmation of his impending doom. His stomach sunk to the ground.

Jeremy looked down. His knuckles were white and he hadn’t even realized it. He unclenched them, walked wobbily to the door, and opened it, counting his breaths the entire way there.

The door creaked open, the screen following it, and *oh, fuck.*

“Hey!” Michael said, while Jeremy’s hand slipped off the door handle.

“H— hi,” Jeremy died, maybe, then struggled to maintain his best we’re-just-friends-and-I-only-love-you-like-a-bro face as he took one up-and-down sweep of Michael’s outfit.

God damn, he's hot— why does no one mention this? Jeremy needed at least four more pep-talks and he was *unprepared.*

Jeremy sucked in another breath, already feeling his face flush with heat. He *tried* to fight his eyes, but they were trained on Michael, like tunnel-vision.

Black slacks, black button-up, with a red gilet and a matching tie. Under the vest, a gold belt buckle, and the slight snippet of a belt strap that matched his burgundy shoes.

He tugged Jeremy into a warm embrace, arms hooked around his back and head in the crook of his neck. “You look good Jer,”

Though, his outfit wouldn’t of mattered if it wasn’t for the guy in it. Michael Mell. Jeremy’s first instinct was that he wanted to kiss him, and God, it’d be so easy to! He’d play it off as a joke for extra rehearsal practice and Michael would laugh, because it’s that normal to him.

But no, it’d be inappropriate, and plus, he didn’t really like initiating kisses anyways. Made his stomach twist with guilt.

Michael Mell. Jeremy thought, trying to come up with what to say next. There was so much to like about him.

*He* was the only guy alive other than *maybe* Hugh Jackman who could style his hair into a jaw-dropping limbo between rugged and clean-cut. Who smelled too good for an almost-sixteen year old geek. Who breathed the life into Jeremy’s lungs and took it away. Who looked *too handsome* on a stupid night like homecoming.

But Jeremy didn't say any of that, and he desperately tried not to think about it, either. Instead, he smiled softly and breathed out the words “Um— you, you look great too.”

Michael grinned conceitedly, while Jeremy silently debated whether or not it was too late to run off into the forest and become a hermit.

Though, he swallowed regret down and lead Michael over the threshold into his kitchen.

“Nice suit, Michael.” Mr Heere said, wearing a tattered brown bathrobe and dirty white slippers. He sipped on a late cup of coffee and shot the two of them a thumbs-up.

“You too, Mr Heere.” Michael rolled his eyes and sluggd Jeremy’s arm. Jeremy stayed quiet, his fingers fidgeting with the flower.
He could see the deep reflects in Michael’s waistcoat, the oily polish of his shoes, the creases and folds of his untucked shirt, and the blessed, too smug a smile on his face.

“Here— I almost forgot.” Michael said, fumbling with his pocket. He pulled out a small, clear plastic box with a flaky, dyed paper rose. “Your boo-tin-ere? Whatever it’s called. It was ridiculously hard finding a blue one, but y’know.”

He clipped it to Jeremy’s breast pocket, and got away with only stabbing himself once. It looked nice against the grey nap, and even if it was visibly fake, it wasn’t too different to the shade of his tie, so it complemented his outfit nicely.

“O-hm, thanks. It actually looks… nice, I think.” he said, stammering, cursing his awkward tendencies and the unexpectedly tense air. He meant it, he just sucked at vocalizing that. “And! And um, he— here’s yours.”

He lifted the red flower from his clammy hands. It still looked pretty, despite how hard Jeremy had crushed the plasticky stem. The petals were all that mattered, anyways.

Truthfully, it’d be uncomfortable for almost anyone to get so close to a female friend’s chest, but Michael was a guy. But, here’s the thing, Jeremy has too big a crush on Michael for that law to apply to him.

Of course, by now Jeremy should be used to it, they’ve been friends for eleven years and they kiss everytime they hang out, but no, he was so not.

And it sucked too, because whenever Jeremy got nervous, his hands started shaking, so he was there, pressed against Michael trying to wriggle the nettling pin in place without poking him, for far too long.

“Stupid thing.” Jeremy muttered under his hitched breath, and he could feel every cursory puff in Michael’s chest as he snickered. “There w-we go.”

Michael quickly lifted Jeremy’s chin up, and winked at him, like he knew what he was feeling. Jeremy swallowed nervously, face flushing with heat. They both backed away.

God, I’m going nuts.

From the tab Jeremy kept on him, he could see Mr Heere eyeing them shrewdly from the kitchen. Oh, right. Dad’s also here.

His eyebrows were pinched, his nose scrunched while he slowly paced slightly side-to-side—probably confused about why there was such a terse silence stretched between the two boys.

Jeremy hoped he didn’t see the wink, though, with Michael’s thick-rimmed glasses and the angle, he probably didn’t.

Then Mr Heere harrumphed, and uneasily nudged his phone with his pinky; like father, like son. “Alright! Do you two uhm, want a photo together?”

Michael snapped his eyes off Jeremy. Jeremy snapped his eyes off Michael.

There’s a mutual agreement that they’ve been zoned out for far too long. Jeremy hung onto what that might mean, but only for a split-second, then he dropped it.

“Yeah,”
Jeremy fluffed up his hair and, for a fleeting moment as Michael’s side pressed into his, he panicked about where to put his hand.

But, he let himself fall into rhythm. They’ve done photos before, hell, they do it all the time. Michael has a growing album of unposted pictures of them in different Snapchat filters, despite their mutual hatred of candid photography.

So, Jeremy posed naturally, letting his hand fall on Michael’s far upper arm, while Michael’s hovered over the small of Jeremy’s back.

While Michael swung up a probably-blurry peace sign with his other hand and Jeremy’s grin was wobbly, he was sure it was a good photo. It’ll be saved in the scrapbook, if he ever ends up printing it.

So yeah it probably won’t be saved in the scrapbook, Jeremy’s laziness outweighed how good Michael looked. Besides, knowing how gross he can get sometimes with pictures, it’s probably better if Jeremy didn’t have a tangible photo of Michael.

_Honk!_

Jeremy leapt away before quickly regaining some composure and rolling his eyes. He forgot that Ms Langit was just waiting outside for them in the driveway.

“Oh, yeah, alright skipper, uhm, you boys better get along then. Keep me posted.” Mr Heere prompted, turning over towards the fridge, apparently interested in readjusting the grocery list to be perfectly straight.

Jeremy giggled through the weird feeling in the room. He sometimes forgot where he got his awkward genes from, but five minutes with his dad was a good reminder.

Michael’s façade broke too, and they laughed together as they leapt out the door.

Looking at each other like they both knew something no one else did. Like they both felt something no one else did.

Or maybe Jeremy was just imagining that part.

Yeah, he was probably just imagining that part.

Jeremy’s always felt like going to school after hours was a punishment. Eight gruelling parent-teacher interviews and four feeble attempts at extracurriculars later, he’s learned to accept that school was like a daytime job.

That there was absolutely, under any circumstance, no reason to go anywhere near school grounds past the three o’clock bell.

But on the ride there, he couldn’t deny that there was some electricity simmering under his skin. He was… excited, jittery, shifting in his seat like he was a kid going to Six Flags.
Ms Langit made succinct conversation with Jeremy since he’d shotgunned, Michael was listening to some music in the backseat (as a pre-game warm-up, assumingly), and for the first time today, Jeremy was actually not thinking about how terrible tonight could be.

Then they arrived, and it all went to hell. The happiness twisted into a guttural dread, and anxiety crept up into his stomach. He felt the slight urge to hurl, and he’s not even had any alcohol yet.

The school parking lot was half empty, but the driveway to the foyer was lined strictly with cars. Ms Langit made a stop at some close sidewalk.

Jeremy slid out the door, thanking Michael’s mom, and his knees buckled, almost tipping him over. They were wobbly, and they really shouldn’t be.

_Tonight’s going to be fine. Just have a good time. Nothing will happen._

Middleborough’s front foyer was bright in comparison to the outside dusk, and the walls thrummed lowly with music from down the hall.

Jeremy waved to a happy-go-lucky Jake sitting on an indoor bench, guessing that he was probably waiting for Chloe, and Jake winked back at him.

But they kept dawdling down the corridor. Side by side, him and Michael, and as the rhythm got louder and louder with every step, Jeremy noticed the gap in his stomach got deeper and deeper.

Michael must’ve been a little anxious too, or at least anxious enough to where his hand grabbed aimlessly for Jeremy’s and clutched it.

His heart stopped, but Jeremy kept walking. The soft pain was still there, but he’s learned to bare through and live with it, afterall, Michael’s too good a friend to lose.

Still, how was Jeremy going to do the entire night like this, when every moment with him was like scraping open a slowly-healing wound?

“Hey Jeremy,” Rich charmed, with his usual kick in his step as he passed by the pair. He wore an unbuttoned classic beige suit with a long, black tie. Nothing necessarily special about it, but it did look nice. “and Mickey, ‘course.”

“You guys pumped?” he nudged loudly, licking his lips hungrily. Jeremy lowly stepped in the way of their intermingled hands, pre-emptively hiding them from Rich instead of just releasing.

All the while, Michael disengaged, his brows furrowing together. Jeremy figured that he never really liked Rich that much (thanks to the plethora of freshman-era slurs, assumingly) so it wasn’t really surprising to watch his eyes wander off farther down the hall.


“All the while, Michael disengaged, his brows furrowing together. Jeremy figured that he never really liked Rich that much (thanks to the plethora of freshman-era slurs, assumingly) so it wasn’t really surprising to watch his eyes wander off farther down the hall.


“Loosen up a little baby! Have some fun!” he pressed, throwing a supposedly ‘light’ punch at his shoulder. It actually hurt pretty badly, and he was sort of sure there’d be a red imprint, but Jeremy wasn’t going to let Rich know that. He had enough ego already. “Yeah— thanks.”

Michael tightened his grip on Jeremy’s hand. Jeremy didn’t see why.

But, instead of asking, he just tussled Michael by the arm down the hall and away from Rich’s line of sight.
He’d feel rude for doing that usually—and don’t get him wrong—Rich was a great guy who he loved being friends with, but Jeremy really wasn’t in the mood for his relentless jabs and ribald commentary right now. He could be a little… overbearing, sometimes.

Weird though, why was Rich walking away from the auditorium?

Oh, probably to see Jake and Chloe. That’s weird though, Jeremy figured he’d have a date to this, and if he does, where was she? Or he, Jeremy didn’t judge, he’s going with Michael, after all.

Their fingers threaded apart when they reached the stage door. It was coloured maroon, lined with strings of metal foil, and had the school crest on it, for the Middleborough Knights. Jeremy was pretty sure he could see it shaking from the bass on the other side.

For a second, Michael paused, still, with almost palpable enervation lining his jittery eyes. He wasn’t craning his neck to look through the peekhole, he was just absentely staring at the entrance. Brooding over his own heavy, paced breaths.

In, out, in, out. Jeremy could hear them. He was box-breathing, trying to calm himself down, he was nervous.

“You okay?” Jeremy hushedly asked. “Y’know, I know this isn’t really o–our thing, but uh.”

He wasn’t really sure where he was going with that, his mind completely emptied as soon as Michael cocked his head to face him.

Then their eyes locked onto each other’s, and that? That was Jeremy’s weakness.

But Jeremy wasn’t a quitter. He wasn’t just going to lose at an impromptu staring contest, right? So he looked up at Michael through his wispy lashes, through the tight feeling in his chest, through the air of tension and the hum of vibrato music behind them.

Then Jeremy realized something: he’s lost in Michael again. But he didn’t want to be found just yet. He didn’t want to leave this moment.

Could he leave? Michael’s eyes seemed to have entrapped him in some sort of prison. A warm, deep prison, a dungeon of pleasure, and pain.

Maybe he meant to do this to Jeremy. Maybe he played Jeremy for a fool. Maybe Michael was trying to torture him in the sweetest way possible.

But God, Jeremy did not want to leave. Michael could be pulling the strings here, he could be taunting him and making Jeremy fall in love with him, but Jeremy? Jeremy didn’t care.

He could spend hours like this, really, examining each speck and glare in Michael’s eyes or smudge on his glasses.

In a swift, frenetic twist: Michael grabbed him by the collar, and swung around a corner, pressing him against the wall.

Then kissed him.

Briefly, of course, any longer and someone might see them, but it was rougher than usual.

Jeremy was so stunned that he couldn’t stop the pleased noise of surprise slip past his lips before he melted into nothing.
He hardly was able to wrap his hand around Michael’s hair before they separated.

“Sorry. I really needed that.” Michael said, eyes turned downcast.

Jeremy’s blood pressure has never been the same. There was no warning, no preface, no mutual understanding that this was just for practice.

His stomach fluttered, his heart was racing, but “Uh– um, hrm, w-why?” was all Jeremy got out past his lips.

It sounded so stupid, but he figured that’s because he was literally dumbfounded.

Michael chortled. It had some uneasy, sad edge to it that Jeremy didn’t like. “I– er, well, I don’t know. Sorry.”

Jeremy hated it when Michael sounded broken like that.

“N–no it’s o–okay bro. Are you alright?” Jeremy said, maybe too quickly, ignoring the heart palpitations and the probable signs that he might faint.

He looked down, and realized hey, they’ve been in this compromising position a lot more often than friends should be. He’s back up against the wall again, Michael’s caged him off again.

Apparently Michael has realized this too, since his face fell, and he moved backwards, standing his ground unbearably far away, in the centre of the hallway.

“I– I dunno. I guess I’m just nervous for something like this. Y’know. Loud music that isn’t ours. People there we don’t know. It’s weird.” Michael shrugged.

“Ye–yeah. It really is.” Jeremy said. “But I guess it’s good that we’re trying something new, ri-right?”

Michael nodded. He didn’t look convinced, so Jeremy stepped a foot closer to him.

“Look man,” Jeremy started, his voice barely above a whisper. His heart was pacing, thumping in his red hot ears, but that’s not what mattered right now.

What mattered was how Michael’s uneasy with going to homecoming. It’s Jeremy’s job to help him out. “I don’t really like this either if I’m honest, but uh, I think it’s good. Tomorrow we can pig out and chill, and we don’t have to do this again.”

Jeremy wanted to ask about that kiss, he wanted to say what the fuck was that? and get some answers, finally, but no.

Michael was uncomfortable. It’s Jeremy’s job to fix it, not to make it worse.

He dipped Michael’s chin down to face him, noticing that he wasn’t looking right at Jeremy, rather at his forehead, or the intricate placement pattern in the cemented bricks behind them.

“Sinta, look at me.” Jeremy hissed, hoping that Michael might find some amusement out of some mangled American garbage. Instead, all he found in Michael’s eyes was inscrutable shock.

So Jeremy stepped closer, praying it would seem sentimental and comforting.

But now the roles were reversed, Michael’s back was against the wall, and while Jeremy wasn’t pushing him up it, he was still in front of him.

And to stop himself from falling too deep in, from chaos, from being wound up again in his eyes, Jeremy pecked his mouth.

Sweet, and lithe, and short, and he was so fucking glad this hallway was clear of any bystanders and cameras.

“You’re… getting better at that.” Michael muttered, but Jeremy just giggled. He swore he also saw a slight upturn in Michael’s lips.

“Shush. Okay, this is about homecoming, right?”— a hesitant nod— “well, don’t worry about it, then. It’ll be okay, and if, if it isn’t then I have your back.” said Jeremy, voice soft, brushing his finger along Michael’s jaw.

“You’ve got my back.” Michael said blankly.

Jeremy hummed in agreement. “Through and through.”

“Okay fine, but one thing,” Michael prompted, snaking his hand around Jeremy’s back.

Jeremy stifled the squeal, instead letting out a high “Mmn-hm?”

“we’ve got to do some more practice later.”

That was something Jeremy could agree with. Or not, if he had one reasonable bone in his body— which yeah, he didn’t.

So Jeremy didn’t know when ‘later’ was, but he was suddenly excited for it.

---

Homecoming really, wasn’t that bad. Contrary to Michael’s beliefs, it didn’t turn out like Heathers. Some psychopathic maniac did not in fact try to blow up their school.

Nope. They were safe this time.

Now came the real threat: alcohol and unsupervised social environments. Not that Jeremy wasn’t excited, he just had some fears. He’s never been drunk before, and he wants to— he’s just a little nervous. Anyone would be for their first high-school party.

Anyway, in a surprising turn of events, Jeremy wasn’t actually dead on his feet by the time they turned on the lights in auditorium, but yet again, he hadn’t really danced that much.

Or at all, really. Michael broke it down a little bit with Rich and Jenna, and that was fun to watch, but the only things Jeremy did that qualified as ‘dancing’ was ironically air-guitaring to some middle-school kickbacks, following along to the Cha Cha Slide, and lip-syncing to Everybody by Backstreet Boys.

The disc jockey was a little more laid-back, taking song requests openly but mostly playing from a playlist of mid-2000’s songs, so it was an inconsistent amalgamation of Soundcloud rap and mainstream hits.
Michael liked it, a plus, and even though he was a little tired, he still looked ready up to head to the afterparty on the ride there.

Somehow his gelled hair aged well, withstanding the trials of sweat and time, and by now the red tie has gone through so many readjustments that it was basically just a knot around his neck—but he looked good, and obviously excited. His shoulders were shuffling to the beat in his headphones.

Huh. Jeremy guessed that it only took those couple minutes of self-doubt before Michael was back on his feet.

Either way, although Jeremy didn’t do much at homecoming in regards to dancing or belting out lyrics like everyone else, he did have a good time. With the assistance of a tag in Chloe’s latest post, Jeremy made connections: he got phone numbers and gained a hundred Instagram followers in just a few hours.

Anyways. Jake’s-friend’s-brother’s-something’s house was a pretty far drive from the school grounds, so they spent about twenty minutes in Brooke’s brother’s car just listening to music and hanging out while he drove aimlessly through different suburbs.

Jeremy was already a little tense, since being in someone-he-didn’t-know’s car on the way to someone-he-didn’t-know’s house was a little nerve-racking, but Michael was there to calm him down.

“Ready for this?” Michael murmured, and Jeremy nodded, albeit, apprehensively. Of course, Michael picked up on the signs that Jeremy was uncomfortable. Because he always did. Because he’s Michael, and his job apparently was to make Jeremy feel special.

So Michael’s side supported Jeremy’s as he stargazed out the window, and he laced their hands together tautly. Jeremy didn’t have to worry about how badly he was sweating, because the air conditioning was on full blast that he was actually shivering.

Being seen wasn’t an issue either, since Brooke was in the seat in front of them and her brother—who’s eighteen, and clearly just got his license—didn’t let his eyes stray off the road.

So it was sort of smooth sailing. While Michael could make Jeremy go crazy (and he definitely did sometimes), his presence was also relaxing. Some things never change.

In turns out: alcohol and feelings are one cocktail that should never go together when you’re trying to hide a crush.

Not that Jeremy did anything, necessarily. It’s just that he had the urges to, and a growing want for ‘later’, and it was harder to suppress that after three shots of tequila.

He also found out that he really didn’t like the taste of tequila, but after a hour of nursing beer, a mellow Jeremy needed an upgrade to something stronger—even if ‘stronger’ meant ‘burns like a bitch’.

He had one shot of vodka too, and Jenna got him to try Everclear, but he almost spat it out.
Though it wasn’t any good at getting you drunk if it was splattered across the carpet, so it didn’t really count.

His suspicions were confirmed, high-schoolers were jerks, and people did make fun of him for not being able to handle his alcohol, but that was neither here nor there.

Jeremy, surprisingly, didn’t mind, he took it as the joke it was meant to be, instead of overthinking it. The wonders of liquor.

Anyways, even under the influence, Jeremy found ways to quell the hunger in his heart. Sober Jeremy quieted it by instinct, but it kept creeping into drunk Jeremy’s mind.

But he had to hide this, even after the shots, he still had enough rationality and sensibility to know what he felt about Michael was bad.

So he busied himself, whether that be by tipsy karaoke or socializing with new people through the renewed sense of confidence he got off booze. He even forgot about Michael altogether sometimes.

Some girl asked him out midway through the party, to which Jeremy would’ve been shocked by if he wasn’t high off his mind, but he was pretty sure it was a as-a-dare situation either way, since she actually seemed relieved that Jeremy declined.

Her name was Julie, another sophomore, and she whisked herself back into a circle of other stoned girls afterwards.

As for Michael? Maybe it wasn’t on purpose on his part, but he and Jeremy kept their distance, and really only interacted during drinking games. Like drunk Jenga or beer pong, which as they learned, Jeremy’s pretty good at.

Maybe if Jeremy didn’t have a throbbing crush on his best friend, he’d be at his side for the entire night. But well, he was sort of forced to talk to other people.

So Jeremy did keep his hands to himself, hell, he hardly let himself in the same room as Michael. He didn’t kiss him, he didn’t ask about ‘later’, he didn’t accidentally confess or ruin their entire friendship in one night.

Yet.

See, those urges Jeremy was talking about? Those got progressively harder to ignore as the night went on.

Of course, he stayed with his system. It worked like a well-oiled machine, just keeping away from Michael, just occupying himself with other people, with games and drinks and absent-minded conversations.

But at some point late in the night, Michael’s mom’s girlfriend came to pick them up. To bring them home. Michael’s home.

And, to his credit, Jeremy didn’t act weirdly on the drive home, and they sat packed together in the backseat. Sure he wasn’t thinking the most innocent things, sure he wanted to kiss Michael or just
be closer to him, but he wasn’t an animal. He wouldn’t act on it, he wouldn’t let those thoughts take over.

So Jeremy daydreamed blankly out the window until they arrived in the Langit driveway, then clambered up the stairs with Michael following suit.

They were still drunk, still high— though maybe a little sobered up— and they’d probably both get firm scoldings tomorrow morning, but until then, they were let off the hook. Sent upstairs into the dungeon that was Michael’s bedroom.

At this point, Jeremy forgot about his system. About his rules. Of course, it’s not like it could save him now anyways.

But Jeremy didn’t realize that until Michael closed the door. Then panic started setting in.

Because now, they were alone. Something Jeremy’s wanted all night, something he’s been dreading all night, something he’s tried to avoid all night.

He’s trapped, and okay, Jeremy wasn’t some monster, he’d never do anything without anyone’s permission, period. It’s just that, when he’s sober, he never tries to do anything.

But he’s drunk now. Those laws don’t apply anymore. The risk didn’t bother him anymore. He wanted to try.

“So, Jeremy.” Michael said, untying the knot around his collar. He swung the red strap around his neck loosely. “How tired are you?”

A slur in his voice, half-lidded eyes, stumbling feet, yep. All clear signs that he was drunk, too. Not that Jeremy didn’t know that already, he’d witnessed Michael downing shots just a couple hours earlier.

“I— not really.” Jeremy answered, sitting on the bed while he unbuttoned his jacket. “You?”

Michael’s body spun over towards his closet. There, he unbuckled his vest and idly looped it around a hanger. Won’t it still get wrinkles like that?

“Me neither. I thought ’ts ’pposed to make you tired?”

Jeremy slugged his shoulders in what could be passed off as a shrug. Then, he realized Michael wasn’t looking at him.

“I dunno, maybe we’re just ‘nvincible.” He giggled.

Michael chuckled, and maybe Jeremy was just hallucinating (did someone lace the weed?), but with every huff, his pitch twisted lower, and lower.

Jeremy shifted slightly in his seat with one part fear, two parts anticipation.

Then Michael turned around to him, hair disheveled, face hardened with determination, eyes lit with something different, and hell, that’s when Jeremy knew how deep of trouble he was really in.

“Say, you up for some practice?”

Sure, Jeremy, on some level, expected it, but he was so stupefied that it didn’t even matter. He looked up at Michael, and still, blanked.
This *should* be a bad idea to him. He *should* say no, to save himself. But he’s too buzzed-out, Jeremy didn’t care about risks or responsibilities or keeping his eleven year friendship normal anymore.

What he cared about has been reduced to fulfilling primitive desires and unrealistic fantasies, no matter the consequences.

“Sure.” Jeremy simpered. Like it wasn’t going to kill him.

It sounded like a great idea to him. It *looked* like a great idea when Michael jumped on his bed beside Jeremy.

What could go wrong?

“Great.” Michael said, voice lazy, with a rough, interesting edge to it. He swung off his glasses, Jeremy tried not to stare at his bare face. “I’ve been wanting this all night.” *but not as much as I have*.

“My too,” Jeremy admitted, stomach fluttering and face flustering as Michael’s hands began to trace up his profile. “but I figured locking us in a closet would’ve been er, suspicious.”


His hand traveled from Jeremy’s ear down his jaw, and finally, to his chin. His touch was light, warm, comforting, and Jeremy’s head leaned into it incidentally, almost purring.

*You know this is a bad idea right?* that reasonable voice told him.

*I’m aware.* Jeremy replied back, still letting his hand drift shyly from Michael’s neck to his chest.

He wanted to kiss Michael— finally, he’s been waiting *so long*— and be swallowed by his own selfish desires. But, he wanted Michael to do it, no, he needed Michael to do it. He felt less guilty that way.

“Hey, you’re spacing out again.” Michael prodded, tapping his thumb against Jeremy’s freckled cheek. “Somethin’ wrong?”

*Why are you doing this to me?* he thought, but didn’t say. Of course he wouldn’t say that, because Michael isn’t doing *anything* to him. He’s doing a favour, for play rehearsal, it's just that this time, he's doing the favour drunk. Nothing wrong with that.

“No,” Jeremy hummed, in a dulcet voice, with his eyes glazed over. “nothing’s wrong, actually.”

It’s a complete and utter lie. Everything was wrong, *this* was so wrong, but that’s not how Michael saw it, so that’s not how Jeremy saw it.

“If you’re not up to this, just tell me okay?” Michael said, and there’s a *pause* in the room— and why was Jeremy’s hands shaking? This, this is fine. This is normal for them.

He could’ve said no. He could’ve told Michael that this wasn’t going to end well or that he was uncomfortable, like his gut feeling was trying to tell him to do. But Jeremy didn’t, because that’d be a lie.

Besides, that would be admitting that something’s wrong about this. Which there wasn’t.

Michael’s fine, so he’s fine. *I’m fine.*
Jeremy wasn’t convinced, but he nodded anyways. “Of course, Micah.”

Sure, he was lying, but he wasn’t really lying. Jeremy did want this, right? Even if this was all fake, even if this hurt, even if this was wrong. This was what he craved. This was what he wanted.

Jeremy guessed, yeah. This is what he asked for. He agreed to practice, and he kept agreeing to it every time, just hoping that one more time might satisfy him.

Spoiler alert, it never did.

Of course, in the ideal world, they wouldn’t be doing this because of a mishapped casting call. They wouldn’t be kissing because hey, Jeremy’s nervous about play rehearsal and making a fool of himself.

But that’s what Michael did this for. Practice, and maybe a little bit of teasing here and there. So Jeremy’s just made a bigger fool of himself, really.

There isn’t love here. No matter how badly Jeremy wanted to convince himself that. It’s black and white.

Maybe that’s why he hated himself so much. He did all this just to pretend like there’s more here, because it’d finally be enough for him, it would finally gratify Jeremy’s insatiable desires. He was sick, then, he was just using Michael to feel something.

And yet, and yet.

Lead by Michael’s index finger, his chin tilted up and met Michael’s face. There, his pupils were blown, contrasting black against the pale red that tainted his scleras, and they bore into Jeremy’s skull.

Jeremy wondered if there was anyone else in the world he’d be willing to be this vulnerable with. But that’s love.

It makes you do crazy things, end up in crazy scenarios, with crazy feelings that apparently no one’s allowed to know about. And it hurts sometimes, the pressure of keeping everything under wraps, but it’s what Jeremy had to do. For Michael. For himself. For their friendship.

But despite everything, Jeremy wanted this. He was helpless, and he knew that, he can never be whole again until this all blows over, but if this is the closest he can get to any satisfaction for now, then so be it.

He’ll get over Michael soon enough, he has to.

Still, it’s hard not to want more.

“Please, Michael, just— just kiss me already.” he whispered, pathetically. They were words he wanted to scream, with every single cell in his being, but all he got out was a meek, shy plea.

And if Michael said no that night, then maybe Jeremy would’ve died, right then, right there. He’s never been this vulnerable in his life, and it would’ve ruined him.

But luckily, how was Michael supposed to say no to a pout like that?

The next moment they’re kissing, and it’s not tender. They’re rough, fervent little kisses, with a messy urgency, a mutual need, that didn’t grant enough time for silly constructs like breathing.
Jeremy was emboldened by love and by the scent of booze on Michael’s skin. He wrapped his arms around Michael’s neck and pulled him closer, and closer, until Michael filled the space between his knees, until their chests pressed together, until everything was just Michael.

Jeremy’s had a taste of him, but he’s not sure it’ll ever be enough. Then again, nothing really was.

See, there was a difference between how drunk Michael and sober Michael kissed.

Sober Michael was patient. He was slow, smooth, and smug— which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing— but he’d always wait for Jeremy to catch up to his pace, to show him the ropes and the nuances.

He’d wait for Jeremy to get impatient, and when he did, Michael bit back, sometimes literally.

But drunk Michael? Drunk Michael was a completely different story. Jeremy didn’t realize how much he’d been restraining himself before.

Drunk Michael was the one hungry for more. Physically. His hands kept Jeremy locked in place, one on his hips, one on his jaw, while he licked down Jeremy’s bottom lip and tugged on it with his teeth.

Jeremy didn’t know what else to do, feeling himself fall apart at the seams and being unable or unwilling to stop the destruction.

So they latched together, almost rhythmically, with frantic hands, bumping noses, and soft noises dripping out of spit-slicked mouths.

It was inexperienced, fake, and clumsy.

But it was… perfect. As perfect as a fake, drunken, hormone-spurred kiss at one in the morning could be.

Until air decided to exist, and they tore away from each other to breathe. Only a couple inches, because life deemed that they were two celestial bodies revolving only around each other, and gravity just didn’t let them be any farther apart.

Though, that’s a very romantic sentiment for something so bittersweet.

It’s still a surprise, every time they separate, because then Jeremy sees Michael on the other end, lips swollen and hair disheveled, and realizes he kissed him, he did this. It’s a high.

Sure, it didn’t feel right to be apart, but seeing how much Jeremy winded Michael, how he had to take time out of his day just to recover, it was definitely worth it. It’s a sight Jeremy wanted to see all the time.

Jeremy let himself sit in this, he let himself indulge Michael for now. His face went florid, his heart leapt up into his throat, and his mouth fled open with ragged pants, and he’s never felt so alive.

He now realized how dangerously low one of his hands were on Michael’s stomach, but Michael didn’t seem to mind.

Like a haywire asteroid entering orbit, Michael crashed back into Jeremy. Suddenly, Michael was everywhere, all at once, his hands up Jeremy’s back and around his waist, pulling him closer.

He was kissing Jeremy harder, deeper than before with a sloppy, intoxicated ardor, and Jeremy
didn’t stop him, he kissed back.

He whimpered when Michael bit into his bottom lip. Michael fluttered his eyes open with hazy shock.

Jeremy’s cheeks burned up, his arms tightened around Michael’s nape, prying into the black collar, all while retaining some dazed eye contact. He slid his tongue down and gently sucked on Michael’s lip. Hot. It’s way too hot in the room.

“Holy shit.” Michael breathed, his lips sliding off Jeremy’s and instead, turned to peppering him with quick, rough, experimental kisses down his jaw.

And Jeremy didn’t try stifling the sounds anymore, not that his drunken self was any good at it. With Michael’s mouth not there to smother out the noises, they just dribbled out.

Apparently, Jeremy’s pleasure became a pursuit for Michael. He meticulously pressed kisses into his skin, mapping the underside of his chin down to his neck, like he was looking for something.

There’s a sweet-spot— and Jeremy didn’t know it was there either— right beneath the left side of his jawbone.

Jeremy swore, he didn’t mean for it to slip out. It just happened. His back arched hotly, and every cell in his body, rocked down to the bone, just ached for “M— Michael,”

Maybe he found what he was looking for, then.

Michael froze, the room iced over, and Jeremy’s blood ran cold. He didn’t know what to say. He felt a smile against his neck, before Michael pulled back.

Then, they were staring at each other, like they’d both just regained consciousness, sobered up, and realized that this? — Sitting in their friends lap, making out platonically? — wasn’t normal.

But maybe not, because Michael didn’t actually say anything. He didn’t move, or yank himself away from Jeremy. He just looked at him, with terror in his eyes, with his swollen mouth slightly agape, with his heavy, fast breaths puffing into the space between them.

Then Jeremy realized something. Michael didn’t look scared, or panicked, or horrified.

“Say it again.”

He looked greedy. It wasn’t fear in his eyes, Jeremy narrowed, it’s lust.

Even drunk, Jeremy couldn’t think of anything else to say other than what. “What?”

“My name.” his pupils were blown, his features hardened, his tunnel-vision landing only on Jeremy.

He wasn’t acting like himself, but then again, neither was Jeremy. Maybe if they weren’t drunk out of their minds, this wouldn’t have happened.

But hey, they’re already here, right?

Jeremy let a soft hum of assent past his lips, and now, they were on the same page. Michael flashed him a devilish smirk, before returning to his post, head tilted under Jeremy’s jaw, mouthing down the sensitive tendons above his collar.
There’s a soft pain to it all, to the tingles running down his back, and it feels like heaven and hell all at once. It’s the same song and dance, sure, Jeremy’s been through this before, yeah, but he never got over it. It’s still suffocating. It’s still too much.

And still, not enough.

“Michael,” he whispered hesitantly, and Jeremy could feel his skin from under him shiver with delight.

He bit at Jeremy’s neck. This time, the name flowed out more naturally, confidently, spurred-on by the flow of booze and pleasure. “Michael.”

“Jer, you’re going to be the death of me.” Michael exhaled, the breath brushing across his skin. “Full-on.”

In panic, Jeremy grabbed desperately at Michael’s shoulders, gasping, because Michael decided to haphazardly sink his teeth into his clavicle. Does he know what he’s doing to Jeremy?

”Michael—”

It’s choked, needy, and breathless.

The sobered voice inside wondered if there was ever a future where this never happened.

Where maybe Jeremy didn’t fall in love, or try to fight in an uphill battle, where he just admitted defeat, and things went back to being okay.

Where they were completely normal friends who did completely normal things, and never anything different.

Jeremy silently deliberated if he’d even want to live there, if given the chance.

No, actually. He’d rather be here.

He craned his neck for better access, bumping his jaw against Michael’s forehead slightly, before they were back into the same swing.

“Fuck, Michael,” he groaned, feeling Michael’s hands sweep down his neck, the gentle tickle making him shiver.

A glutton for punishment, maybe someone could call Jeremy that. Because yeah, he hated this, he hated every second because IT HURTS.

He was being taunted with what he could have, tortured even, but then again, he was absolutely reeling in this. How could he not be? He was kissing his crush— even well, even if it didn’t matter. Those snippets of Michael’s deep, guttural sounds were like music to Jeremy’s ears anyways. His half of a duet of sexualized, slurred noises.

And God, Jeremy needs to stop showing Michael what he can do to him. How easily he can tear him apart.

“Michael please, oh, God— Michael,” he whispered, wanton and dulcet and it’s just so, so wrong.

Michael’s been focused on one particular spot for a minute, maybe sucking the red out of it like the apple from Snow White. Jeremy could feel the skin turning raw under Michael’s teeth.
It’s a sweet-spot, too. Jeremy was unwinding in Michael’s grasp, with his mewls rousing the attack. Michael moaned softly against the skin, eventually weaning off for air, smirking proudly at the developing colour on Jeremy’s neck.

His fingertips grazed the spot, and Jeremy shuddered.

“Pretty.” Michael simpered, and Jeremy blushed, like that was more intimate than anything else they just did.

“T–thanks.” Jeremy said. He kind of wanted to mark Michael, he kind of wanted to ask, and fuck, he’s on such an adrenaline high that it wouldn’t even be hard to ask. Jeremy felt amazing. Breathtaken, literally, though a little exhausted.

Michael brushed his fingers up against Jeremy’s face, twirling one of his curls behind his ear lazily. “Prettier.” He mumbled, more under his breath this time, but Jeremy could still hear him.

Michael swung side-to-side absently, humming to nothing, still impossibly close to Jeremy. The hot air seemed to fizzle out, but Jeremy was still flushing. The heat inside seemed kinder, affectionate now, fuzzy, even.

Almost by instinct, Jeremy shuffled off Michael’s lap, and fell back-first into the sheets, leveling out his breathing, touching the tender spot on his neck, wondering if that had actually just happened.

He could feel the mark. Still wet.

“Agreed.” Michael said, flopping onto the bed himself. He stared up at the ceiling as he unbuttoned his shirt. Jeremy didn’t stare, mostly because he was too exhausted to turn his head.

The night had apparently, finally caught on to Jeremy. His eyelids, even if wasn’t that tired, were drooping.

“Eeh, I don’t wanna get up.” Michael whined. “What if I just stayed like this? I can sleep in dress pants.”

Jeremy sighed, stretching his arms out and accidentally hitting Michael in the head. Later, he should be grateful he was drunk, because hell, if he was sober? He couldn’t imagine how bad his anxiety and regret would be.

For now, it was just simple feelings. Warm, inviting feelings, burrowed in his heart.

“Ow.” said Michael, then “See if you can stretch all the way to my shorts.”

“Where are they?”

Michael pointed. Across the room. They were swung over a desk chair, way out of arm’s reach. Jeremy giggled like it was the funniest thing that’s ever happened to him.

“Fuck it, I’m sleeping in my underwear.”

Yep. Very glad he was drunk. Sober Jeremy would freak out, but drunk Jeremy was too buzzed to care. He just said “Same” plaintively, and hardly flinched as Michael undressed beside him, or as clothes flung across his cone of vision.

They settled in bed, clicked on some random Netflix documentary, and said goodnight.
It took about another hour before Jeremy realized what he did was not okay.

He was still awake, sure, if you could call it that. He’s been going in-and-out of sleep for half an hour, but Jeremy apparently, couldn’t catch a break, even exhausted, even with all the booze, weed, and karaoke.

He didn’t really know if Michael was up anymore, he didn’t really snore. The last time they talked was maybe fifteen minutes ago to watch Chloe Valentine’s Snapchat story together, and even if they were laying right beside each other, Jeremy still couldn’t muster enough effort to just look over at him.

Safe to say, the documentary wasn’t interesting enough to be the only reason he stayed awake.

He’s thinking again, and God, he was sobering up from the alcohol, and the weed, and the adrenaline. Jeremy was back to being himself again, and the good feelings withered away into sickness.

He wanted to throw up, he felt suffocated and anxious.

“I’m, uh, gonna go to the bathroom.” Jeremy said softly, to no one in particular, as he jumped up off the bed.

Michael was asleep actually, so he actually didn't have to announce he was leaving, but he only just realized that by a snippet of Michael's closed eyes in the faint laptop light.

Seeing him made Jeremy's stomach twist inside-out.

Jeremy barely got to the respite of the bathroom before the panic started setting in for real. The first thing he did was slam the door shut and let his body slink down onto the floor.

He knew he didn’t have that much time here, since Ms Langit and her girlfriend were both still downstairs and definitely heard him slam the door, but he needed to take a breather. Jeremy really, really needed one, and maybe a drink too, if that’s an option. He wasn’t sure how he’d live this down.

Whimpering into Michael’s ear— letting him, his best friend! — kiss down his neck, and fuck, saying his name, Christ. Purgatory will be long and spiteful for Jeremy Heere.

He pressed his fingers to the same spot on his neck, it still felt like baby fresh skin, and under it, his pulse was racing.

Jeremy stood up, his knees wobbly and his feet still stumbling in place. In the mirror, his nightmare was confirmed.

There, just above where his shirt collar was, was a deep red lovebite, with a couple of slightly pink, flush blemishes up his neck. Jeremy shivered, his fingertips trailing back and forth between all the marks, like a Connect The Dots puzzle.

He could only hope that Michael was drunk enough to not remember it in the morning, while Jeremy will always remember what it felt like feeling Michael's bulge under him.
Sure, he drank more than Jeremy, but since Jeremy was a lightweight, that wasn’t really saying much.

But then again, how was Jeremy supposed to hide these from Michael? What was he going to say?

God, and what was Jeremy thinking? Why was there always a greedy part of him begging for more? Why did he like it?

He hated liking it. He shouldn’t have. This was wrong. Michael made him feel special and he caved, again and again. His skin crawled, this was taking advantage of his best friend.

“Why me? I don’t know what I did to deserve this.” he whined silently, like an angel was going to descend to Earth and tell him the answer.

Jeremy was still, so lost. Everything changed, but everything stayed the same, didn’t it? They were still in some hell-like grey area, still friends who did things friends shouldn't do.

He scoured the bathroom cabinet for concealer, but sadly, Ms Langit’s makeup was too tan for his pale skin.

So he’s just gonna have to go back to sleep now, but he’ll throw up first. Maybe he could call Mr Heere early tomorrow morning before Michael wakes up and slip out of the house under his nose.

That night, Jeremy laid silently in Michael’s bed, restless, tracing the sensitive bruises on his neck, having the same mental crisis that he’s been having for the last week.

Maybe it was the alcohol talking, maybe he was just vulnerable, maybe he just didn’t care enough to stop himself anymore. This kissing pact was the last straw, it broke Jeremy.

God, his life has been so upended. Michael, and these new hobbies, and these new friends too, just, there was so much jam-packed into one short period of time. Everything just seemed to hit Jeremy at once, like a train going a hundred-and-eighty miles per hour.

Jeremy always thought that not thinking about it would solve everything. He always had to stop himself, keep the balance and focus on other things, like doing overdue homework or watching the next episode of The Office.

Jeremy figured that if he ignored it long enough, he’d stop loving Michael. If he never thought about it, then maybe it’d just go away.

That proved to not be the case.

How was Jeremy supposed to ignore it when here it was plastered over his neck, haunting him?

Probably one of the only things Jeremy could salvage off of helplessly pining after Michael was that he was a more organized human being.
It sounded stupid. It was stupid. But over the month and a half since Jeremy’s sexuality crisis reached its peak and his feelings for Michael unfurled into a nuclear holocaust, he really did learn some skills.

He could compartmentalize better. Mentally, that was. Physically he was a mess that still kept some (well-overdue) library books buried under a heap of schoolwork in his locker, never to see the light of day again; but mentally? He was able to organize and deem what thoughts were good, what feelings were good, and what were bad.

Just so he could guilt himself appropriately and eventually, condition himself what to think and what not to think. Sorting them out, then wringing them out.

He trained himself, if you will, he’s been doing it for a while now. The logic being that if he hated himself enough for doing something, then he wouldn’t do it again. A pretty solid hypothesis based off the Pavlovian response, so Jeremy was basically a genius. Add one part action with two parts shame and eventually that action will come with shame naturally. Like Church.

So the phase one was easy enough. He followed his logic, and whenever Jeremy thought something that was out of line with his four rules, he forced himself to regret it. He made himself feel awful to ward the thought away.

Phase two worked out the same way. At some point, whenever Jeremy’s head suggested something wrong about Michael, guilt and disgust would swallow him for it naturally. He didn’t have to shoot the idea down, he would just already know to not touch it with a ten-foot pole.

The kicker was that phase three? Phase three threw a wrench in Jeremy’s perfectly automated system of well-oiled, churning gears. Phase three apparently didn’t get the memo. Phase three was supposed to be the part where Jeremy gets over Michael, where he stops thinking about Michael in wrong ways, where he puts an end to this circle of unrequited love and gets over Michael Mell.

But phase three was a no-show. Phase three was a colossal failure. Phase three was a scrap project. It should’ve worked. Any reasonable person with self-respect would’ve realized that a silly crush wasn’t worth all this heartache, that a silly crush wasn’t worth the shame and turmoil and bitterness — even if it was self-inflicted.

But apparently, Jeremy Heere was not a reasonable, self-respecting person, because he didn’t get over Michael. If anything, the heart-wrenching love he had for him just doubled in size, which was just great. Fantastic, really.

Jeremy traded a whole lot of self-loathing for a whole lot of nothing. Now everything was so fucking confusing, because he’d thought he had it worked out. He thought eventually it’d die, that it just needed some extra help to make the process a little quicker. He thought he reached his Eureka! moment, his breakthrough in the study of How Not To Fuck Up A Friendship 101, but he didn’t.

Jeremy didn’t know anything anymore, okay? Everything he thought he knew turned out to be a myth. It was like growing up all over again except he’s already fifteen and this was way more complicated. This was love, not fairies or Santa Claus.

He was convinced that this would all be over soon, that it’d blow by quickly like all the other crushes he’s had before— and sure, it hadn’t really been too long since this pining streak started, but it’s felt like forever to Jeremy.

It was like torture, he was constantly teased with Michael. He was constantly holding his hand or
cuddling, kissing him, or fuck, even making out now (Jeremy was still, not sure how that happened), and so much for self-respect.

Here he was now, seeing outlawed thoughts again. Things he’d never allow himself to think normally, were flooding his brain, and here he was now, letting himself get consumed with them.

Maybe it was just the weed, maybe it was just the late hours of the night getting to him, maybe it was the realization that he wasn’t getting over Michael soon.

But Jeremy thought. Jeremy thought about a lot of things, and he didn’t stop himself.

For once, he entertained the thoughts from the back of his mind, he entertained how much he wanted to be with Michael.

He thought about Michael’s loving smile, about how he looked at Jeremy like he hung up the Moon, about waking up to Michael on a rainy day, he thought about Michael in his homecoming tux, he thought about what he’d look shirtless, about carnival dates together and how Michael always tried to win Jeremy a prize.

He thought about how soft his hoodie was, he thought about the radiating warmth off his skin, the plushness of his lips, the musculature that Jeremy could feel even through two layers of fabric, and he thought about what it’d be like to kiss him for real.

Out of all the things he’d want to do with Michael if they were dating, kissing him for real was definitely up there. Maybe number one. He knew it wouldn’t be much different, or hell, any different to what they were doing already, but he wanted it; it was something that was robbed of its intimacy title. Jeremy wanted to put it back.

But the thing is, Jeremy never let himself entertain these thoughts. Maybe he just assumed they were dangerous, hell, maybe they were dangerous, but maybe he should consider some things.

Okay, he thought experimentally, uneasy and on edge like he was dipping his foot into a pool of blood. Jeremy knew this was bad, this was awful, this would be the end of him— what if.

It’s a question he’d never let himself ask before. He spent so much time trying to cover it all up, trying to stop it, that he never bothered to actually think about it.

But here he was, considering something he’d never let himself before. His golden rule, broken.

What if Michael likes me.

Sure. It’s a bold accusation, but Jeremy’s drunk and the post-afterparty scene in the Langit house was echoing in his head, letting him think and wonder what if.

Something he shouldn’t do. Something he never does, and for good reason, probably.

Maybe he just didn’t want to get in over his head. Maybe he just didn’t want to be crushed by disappointment.

Not hoping was safe, after all.

But what if Michael liked him back? There’s a flowchart somewhere, one that Jeremy doesn’t have the patience to create. of all the possible futures connected to the main sequence of What if Michael likes me back.
And oh, God, what if he does like Jeremy back?

Jeremy swallowed nervously. He swore the sound ricocheted off the dark walls, he swore it woke Michael up and rattled the neighbourhood and its surrounding forest animals.

It’s a thought he didn’t want to entertain, it’s a thought that he was scared to entertain. But as little bubbles conjured up in his brain, bubbles displaying memories between the two of them, things became a lot more clearer.

Most were kisses, some were absent-minded caresses from Michael down Jeremy’s back, or sudden grasps at his hand to calm him down. Some were Michael saying cute nothings or racy comments.

A particular thought had Jeremy googling the word ‘sinta’ again under the duvet.

Sweetheart.

SweetheartSweetheartSweetheartSweetheartSweetheart.

Michael called him sweetheart, or love, or darling, if Tagalog translate knew anything about the language they advocated.

Then it all pieced together in one intricate tapestry, like the last string on a web. ‘Sweetheart’ opened the gate. ‘Sweetheart’ let Jeremy believe in something.

"Mmn, Jer, go to sleeep,” Michael drawled, scaring Jeremy half to death with a zombie-like hand stretching up onto his neck. Quickly, he shut his phone, laid his head back slack against the pillow, and nestled into the arm Michael slung around his waist.

A new, giddy feeling woke up in Jeremy’s stomach. He doubted that he’d be able to sleep tonight.

It’s still crazy. It’s still a scary thought. But it might just be.

Those futures? The ones he didn’t want to entertain? He might have to consider them soon. He should get to work on that flowchart.

Because Michael might actually like him back.

Jeremy didn’t know whether to be excited, or terrified.

Chapter End Notes

6) make-out scenes are hard to write

i just saw the show on august 29th, and i didn’t know until then that the middleborough’s team is called the wombats, not the knights. honestly i could give a lesser fuck, i’m keeping it as the knights
wombats are dumb anyways

also!! important!! today’s my first day of school! i would really appreciate feedback and nice comments especially today bc school hasn’t even started yet and i’ve already had an anxiety attack :/
just comments make my day and i love you guy’s support for this story
In Jeremy Heere’s lifetime, someone might say that he ends up sleeping in the same bed as Michael more than he sleeps by himself.

That accusation, honestly, just might be true. He stayed overnight at Michael’s constantly— it was his second home, after all— and there was no room for a second mattress there.

They were practically forced in the same bed together, and that was fine with them.

Neither of them liked it, of course, it was just something that was happening, not something that anyone felt a particular way about.

But what didn’t have to happen whenever they slept in the same bed, was that they didn’t have to cuddle.

But almost every time Jeremy woke up in Michael’s room, he woke up to tan skin and warm arms stretching around his waist.

He could see where the gay rumours came about.

Hell, in the ninth grade especially. Jeremy had ‘run away’ for a couple of weeks— his parents were almost always fighting at home and he hated yelling— and he crashed at the Mell’s.

That’s why Jeremy was so close to Ms Langit. She knew Jeremy’s tough home life, and she let him stay until the divorce blew over. She was always so welcoming and inviting and didn’t seemed to care that there was just one more mouth to feed at their table.

But, staying at Michael’s house meant that he’d woken up in Michael’s bed, sometimes wore Michael’s clothes to school, and showered using Michael’s soap.

He smelled and looked like him, and at that point, he still thought Michael was the Coolest guy to ever exist, so Jeremy tried to act like him, too.

Not to mention that they were bound at the hip anytime they could be. They still are, but well, they’re not bullied nearly as much anymore.

But again, Jeremy had nowhere else to go. Michael was one of, if not his only friend, and at the end of his stay, Michael’s presence kept helping calm Jeremy’s nerves.
Having one friend all your life was difficult, admittedly, things got lonely, and it was weird having so much trust in a single person. They saw each other at their bests, and worsts. Michael knew all his strengths, but also all his weaknesses.

And he had the power and knew exactly how to unwind Jeremy. How to destroy him, even if he didn’t mean to. Which now, in sophomore year, wasn’t a good thing anymore.

Jeremy woke up the day after the party with Michael’s mark on his neck, dread in his stomach, a tan body nestled in his arms.

Sick. He felt sick, so impossibly sick, headache, a dry-mouth, pains all over— and at that point, he hadn’t even realized what they did yesterday night.

*Oh, so this is what it’s like to be hungover.*

He fluttered his eyes open, and the too-bright room around him was already spinning.

And fuck, the urge was almost immediate: Jeremy wanted to go back to sleep. His eyelids were so droopy, he could hardly see anything aside from little blobs of colour in blinding light.

Talk about a graceful awakening.

But, well, then the room materialized around him, and he looked at Michael’s sleeping body, and he remembered yesterday, and he remembered the bruised skin on his neck, and how even a hungover Michael would *definitely* notice.

It all came in at once— the memories, the thoughts, the feelings, the pain— it was overwhelming. Especially the urgency to brush his teeth.

Jeremy didn’t even want to *imagine* the tension in the room if it came up. He shivered, just thinking about it, and he was under three layers of blankets.

So he snuck out of Michael’s hold, grabbed his phone, and tiptoed his way to the bathroom. He really needed to pee, anyways.

> *Jeremy; Hey dad? Can you pick me up? Today at 10:47*

It’s Saturday. Hopefully his dad would be up, or he’s going to have a really tan patch of skin on his neck, but the odds were not stacked in his favour.

God, he didn’t know *how* he’d confront Michael about this. Jeremy wasn’t sure if he ever would. Maybe he’ll hide out in his house for the next couple of days, maybe buy some concealer at CVS so no one sees it on Monday.

But, he’ll have to worry about how he’ll hide the hickey later. For now, he’ll stare at it in the mirror, wondering how this happened, and brush his teeth, trying to rid the gross, rotted taste of liquor in his mouth.

He was thankful that he kept a personal toothbrush at the Langit house, because hangover breath is *acrid*, and he wasn’t sure if his finger could do the same job.
Jeremy looked at himself in the mirror while he brushed. He noticed that honestly, his pale skin was so light that it was sort of reflective to the bright, blue-toned lights in the bathroom, and suddenly felt a little more self-conscious.

And there it was.

It’s something that was never there before, a small, maroon bruise, right where he last saw it. It’s new, fresh, just happened nine hours ago, and Jeremy didn’t know if it meant anything, if it changed anything.

Apparently, nothing changed anything anymore. Apparently, their bond was unphased by the breakage of the general boundaries that most friends respect. Apparently, cuddling and kissing were just normal ways to past the time now.

So no. This probably wouldn’t change anything. Nothing else did. He’d write it down in his journal, and everyone would pretend it didn’t even happen.

It was like whiplash, sometimes Jeremy thought he was going insane, because he was fine, right? He was supposed to be fine, he had to be. Because this was just a normal day, and even though Jeremy couldn’t help feeling like everything was suddenly different, nothing actually changed.

Sooner he can accept that reality, the sooner he could face Michael, the sooner he’ll forget about yesterday night.

Jeremy was back in Michael’s house, he was tired and had a minty taste in his mouth, anxiety was again, cementing in his stomach, and he still hated Michael for making him feel so confused.

Because everything stayed the same, except there was a new build-up of grime on the bathroom tiles, except that his toothbrush was frayed, except that Jeremy was hungover, except that there was a hickey on his neck, except that Michael made it.

Except that, maybe if Jeremy was a little more confident, he’d think that Michael likes him back. Or well, there’s a chance now, and it’s not unbelievably slim, that Michael feels something towards Jeremy.

And Jeremy didn’t want things to stay the same anymore, but he just didn’t know how to change things.

His fingers bounced in an impatient rhythm against the sink, failing to count his own breaths. Jeremy really hoped his dad was up, because fuck, he cannot face Michael like this. He just can’t.

Maybe there’s a sweater somewhere he could borrow, something with a thick collar or hood, he’s going to need something to wear from his drawer in Michael’s dresser, but really, he didn’t remember ever leaving one here.

Maybe he could take one of Michael’s, but in that case, he’d have to ask him, which meant some confrontation before he was dressed.

Maybe Jeremy could pretend he showered? He could wrap a towel around his neck? Or maybe he should actually shower, because he kind of smells. Eh, deodorant will do.

Okay, and all this strategizing was really making Jeremy’s head hurt. It could at least wait until after he found the painkillers.

Hell, he could hardly think straight, his brain was throbbing. Thanks, Christine, this was the real
high-school experience that Jeremy always wanted.

Ugh, no point wasting time pushing blame on people who aren’t even here to take it. He rolled his eyes, dug into the medicine cabinet, and pulled out some Advil and a near empty bottle of Tylenol.

It was probably best if he didn’t mix them, because if he recalled that one anti-drug PSA his teacher showed him in the eighth grade correctly, something about that makes them more dangerous? He couldn’t really remember. The memory’s foggy.

But whatever, it didn’t really matter anyways, he was desperate for some relief right now. Plus, they’re over-the-counter, so it’s probably fine. He was pretty sure that PSA specified prescription drugs.

So Jeremy threw two of each down the hatch after a quick read of the label on the back, chasing it with some lukewarm tap-water out of a Dixie cup.

Then he eyed the pesky, small makeup bag under the sink, like it’d insulted him. It had black and white stripes, with a purple, unidentifiable logo sewn into the corner.

Fuck it, let’s just… try something, he thought hazily, realizing now that the bathroom lights were way too fluorescent, and were probably the thing making him so dizzy, besides his very obvious hangover.

He picked up a small plastic tube, the lightest shade Michael’s mom owned, unscrewed the cap, and swatched it on his wrist.

And yep, it was way too tan on him. The contrast was stark, and would probably beg more questions than Jeremy was already going to get.

Damn it, why did Jeremy have to be so pasty? Has he heard of sunlight before?

Jeremy huffed out a frustrated noise. He ran a tissue under some cold water, rubbed it down his hand, then looked down at his phone, frowning when he saw the time.

Fuck. It’s been fifteen minutes, and dad still hasn’t text me back.

He sighed, time for some early morning, last resort pep-talks in the mirror.

Michael’s asleep. I’m good for now, he mouthed, reassuringly, squaring his shoulders. And I’ll be even better if dad will get here before he wakes up.

Sure, it’s not a fool-proof plan, but it was the best one he could come up with that wasn’t ‘use Michael’s mom’s too-dark-for-me concealer to hide this obvious hickey on my neck.’.

Medicine cabinet, he reminded himself, almost robotically before he spun around. Right. Put back the pills.

He pulled open the already ajar cabinet door, returned the two short bottles onto their shelf, and accidentally knocked over a pack of adhesive bandages.

Band-Aids, he read, as the box dropped into the sink.

Then, in a moment of absolute glory, he’d found his solution. Band-Aids, he repeated, like a mantra, like he’s been out in the desert for forty days and just found reached fountain of youth.

I’ll hide it with Band-Aids.
Jeremy fumbled open the box, almost tearing off a corner, and placed two wide bandages against the tender skin, thanking the Gods of Johnson & Johnson’s for creating this gift to mankind.

It still looked a little suspicious, but thankfully, all the other smaller, pink, faint blemishes from yesterday night, were dulled down into pale flesh again. Now it just looked like Jeremy had been cut in a very specific spot on his neck.

Jeremy smiled weakly, proud of his handiwork, but still aching too much to lift his lips any higher.

He’s still betting on Michael being asleep for just a little longer, just to be safe. Jeremy’s nerves were way too frayed to deal with any confrontation this early in the morning—

“Woa, hey bro.” Michael said, as soon as the door buckled open, as the bottom of Jeremy’s stomach dropped out.

Okay. Apparently I have the worst fucking luck in the universe. Great. Cool.

Jeremy leapt, almost smacking his head against the doorpost, but missing by a graceful inch.

“O–oh um, hi.” he said, like there was nothing wrong. Like he wasn’t just greeted to a full-frontal of a shirtless (albeit hungover) Michael with disheveled hair and a sultry morning voice. Like he didn’t have a lovebite on his neck from that same Michael. Yep. Nothing up here.

Just, please don’t notice please don’t notice please don’t notice—

Then Michael’s eyes widened, whether that be in awe, realization, or disgust, was up for debate.

So Jeremy was inactively breaking down behind the nervous exterior, and there Michael was, musing at the Band-Aid like it was some intricate artwork at a gala.

God, he’d give anything to know what Michael was thinking right now. He

Jeremy really wanted Michael to just forget yesterday ever happened. He didn’t want to deal with the repercussions right now, or ever, really. He crossed his fingers, praying silently that the universe had a smidge of mercy to grant him in his time of need.

Hopefully Michael didn’t remember. Hopefully Michael was too drunk to remember, because Jeremy wasn’t ready for an intervention right now.

Hopefully this conversation goes smoothly so that Michael can go into the bathroom and finally brush his teeth, and so Jeremy could stop intently staring at Michael’s collarbone.

But then, that begged the question, what if Michael forgot? He’s been asking a lot of what if s lately, but what if this goes unsaid? Will Jeremy just have to deal with the guilt? Will it just be there, a weight on Jeremy’s shoulders?

Fuck, was he ever supposed to tell Michael what happened? Were they never going to talk about it? Would Jeremy ever get the chance to?

What did this mean for them? Was it better if it went unsaid? Or were they supposed to talk about this?

Jeremy gulped under the scrutiny.

Should he tell Michael what happened? Did he want to?
Simple answer, no. Long answer, yes.

His head was hurting again, he needed to stop thinking, and just make up his mind — and stop staring at the indents in Michael’s clavicle. But Michael was staring at him, too, so it’s not weird if they’re both doing it.

Jeremy’s hickey was hidden by the bandages, though, and Michael wouldn’t see it. And Jeremy knew that, he spent ten minutes in the mirror perfecting its placement, but still, he was still scared that Michael somehow just might.

On edge, at least, because the hickey felt so obviously there to Jeremy. To him, Michael was ignoring the elephant in the room, but truth was, Michael couldn’t see or remember an elephant ever being in the room.

But he knew what was behind that adhesive. A purpling mark bitten into Jeremy’s skin, stinging for attention, begging to be revealed to the man who made it — and it was so close, too, to Michael.

Michael’s fingers materialized under Jeremy’s jaw, trying to peel back the bandage.

“Yo, what happened?” he said, calmly. Because he didn’t know yet.

And he wouldn’t know, yet. Sure there were chances, but Jeremy still had too much self-doubt. It wavered. Yesterday’s alcohol-spurred thoughts meant nothing to real life, because real life was so unbelievably scary.

So Jeremy jolted back, threw his hand over it protectively, and scrunched up his eyebrows.

As he moved, the ache in his muscles burned, and it was like his his brain was rattling violently against his skull, and it probably was.

“Nothing!” Jeremy yelped, pulse racing. “I mean — I just, I think someone… cut me, last night.” he recovered, choosing his words carefully, and just now realizing that yeah, both of them were in their underwear right now, weren’t they?

A ball of anxiety barreled into his throat and cut his breathing short. Because of something really stupid and common that shouldn’t have any effect on him.

Just keep your eyes up. he reasoned, because that wasn’t too hard to do.

It’s a simple task, despite the hormonal teenage temptations, despite the weird, silent wonder as to what boxers Michael was wearing.

They were in his peripherals and he was curious, okay? Jeremy got distracted easily, and it was just something to focus on that wasn’t Michael’s almost-nude musculature.

(They looked black, with maybe yellow stripes? Were they bee-themed? No, Michael didn’t own any of those… aha! His Batman boxer-b Briefs.)

Jeremy then wondered if he’d just spent time out of his day piecing together what underwear his crush was wearing just so he could avoid the awkward air between them. The answer, was yes.

He flitted his eyes back into focus, and there was Michael, who, at first, looked concerned, his eyes trained at the bandage. Tilting his head, knitting his eyebrows, glaring at Jeremy with that insidious smolder of his.
For a second, Jeremy wondered if Michael realized.

But then Michael pressed his hand against his head, dropped his gaze to the floor, and shrugged.

“Allright, um, sorry, I guess? But can you step out of the way? This headache is killer.” Michael said, exhaustively.

“Oh— oh! Right, of course man.”

Jeremy breathed in relief when the door slammed shut behind him. He covered his face with his hands, and realized just how hot his skin was.

Then he was left alone, with a burn searing down his spine and a heartbeat going too fast for ten in the morning.

Jeremy never did confess to Michael.

He didn’t really know what he was waiting for, honestly.

But ever since that night after the party, he just couldn’t bring himself to try, even if he didn’t really know what was stopping him anymore.

Maybe he just didn’t know how to bring it up, maybe he was waiting for the perfect moment to seize, but with every day that passed, Jeremy’s doubt just grew, and he was back at square one within a fortnight.

He didn’t think Michael liked him, and sure, there were a couple of moments where maybe there was something going on, but no.

Jeremy shouldn’t have gotten his hopes up, he should go back to crushing down his feelings and warding them away— and that’s what he did, on his own volition.

They acted like nothing happened, things went back to normal, and he let it happen.

Still, Jeremy couldn’t stop thinking about that night. Even in early November, whenever they hung out, Jeremy just sometimes would remember things in short flashbacks, and press his fingers against his neck, and get lost, just thinking about Michael, and what they did.

Sometimes, Jeremy really wanted to tell him. Sit him down on that couch in his basement, go over a monologue that he’s prepared in the mirror so many times, and tell him every repressed emotion he’s ever had. More than ever, the weight on Jeremy’s chest was heavy and unbearable.

And to top it all off, they were still kissing, almost every time they saw each other.

Nothing like the homecoming incident, but that didn’t really matter. What matters is that they were still doing this dumb kissing pact, and it was still killing Jeremy.

But thing is, Jeremy never told Michael about how play rehearsal went. He didn’t tell him that kissing Madeline wasn’t hard at all or that they didn’t even need to practice anymore.

Why? Because he was greedy. Because he was clinging onto this one romantic thing they do
together up until rehearsals were over, until it was physically ripped from his hands.

So he hated it, but not enough to stop it, and that’s a lot of pressure.

Sometimes, he doesn’t even know if he’ll survive visits to Michael’s house. They go out bowling or roller-skating and he can’t stop thinking that it’s a date, even though he knows it’s not.

Moments they sneak at the back of the alley, or behind staircases or just as a reward whenever one of them bowled a strike. It’s torture. It feels so much like they’re together, but they’re not, and both of them made sure to remind each other that with jokes about rehearsal.

If Jeremy could pin a word to the feeling, it’d be grief. Regret, maybe. Things could be normal, but they just weren’t.

At least now they’ve been hanging out with other people, which was more of a relief than he’d like to admit. Homecoming night bound them into their new friend group, and kicking back with someone like Rich and not having to worry about saying the wrong thing or accidentally outing himself—

It’s nice. Jeremy was grateful for them, because times like those felt like the only moments in the day where he could breathe.

Halloween passed, too. Jeremy and Michael were too old to go out trick-or-treating and too socially traumatized after their last hangovers to go to another party, so they spent the night together watching vintage animes and ordering in.

November meant that it’s cold in New Jersey.

Of course, it was still early November, so there wasn’t any snow yet, but it was about the time where the school’s heater would break down and everyone would have to wear thick sweaters because somehow, it’s colder inside than it is out.

Which was exactly what happened at Middleborough. Fine with Jeremy Heere, since his wardrobe almost strictly consisted of woolen pullovers and cardigans to compensate for his already thin skin.

November also meant that Jeremy’s daily routine was basically cemented into his head.

So much so that days blended together, and the only things that really mattered anymore was what dates projects were due, the daily four o’clock reminder to send Michael a Snapchat to continue their streak, and whether or not he had time to fit in a jacking-off session into the morning.

He attended school on the weekdays, hung out with his friends on the weekends— mostly so he didn’t have to stay and talk to his dad— and honestly, if he wasn’t pining for his best friend, things would be looking up for Jeremy.

“Seriously Jeremy? You keep a diary of all the things you love about him?” Christine asked, drilling embarrassment right into his gut. “It’s sweet, yeah, but don’t you guys hang out a lot? What if he sees it?”

Christine found out after homecoming. She found out before Michael did. She came over
unexpectedly the day after the party to drop off his textbook and saw his hickey. From there, Jeremy just didn’t stop talking, trying profusely to explain himself.

“First off, it’s not a diary, it’s a journal.” Jeremy rebuked. “And normally Michael isn’t as nosy as you are.”

And she hasn’t stopped talking about it since.

She flipped through the pages, humming at the entries while a flushed-face Jeremy sat with Brooke on beanbags in the background. And yes, Christine roped Brooke into this too. Or well, Jeremy might’ve, during Band he might’ve mentioned it and Brooke might’ve been eavesdropping.

So now, they were apparently his little squadron, tasked with making Jeremy feel just a little worse about where he stands with Michael, with incredulous questions like “How did this even happen?” and too-true statements like “You are so fucked.”.

He was painfully aware, thanks.

At least they provided some vent for him, at least they were there for him on days where he felt like he was going to explode.

“Ugh, Jerry, I love you to bits but like, you need to clean this room up.” Brooke shrugged.

Safe to say they’ve gotten pretty close pretty quickly, but why did he invite them over again?

“What’s wrong with it?” he frowned, whisking his empty frozen yogurt cup out of her line of sight.

“It’s not even that messy.”

“There’s so much nerd shit in here. Your keyboard glows, Jeremy. That’s not a good thing.”

“Michael likes it.” he protested, then realized just how pathetic that sounded, and shrunk into his seat, grumbling.

What was wrong with his keyboard? His dad bought it for him for his birthday, it was an expensive chroma! He spent so much time trying to colour-match it to his bedspread so it’d match his room aesthetic—it looked nice, okay?

“I bet he does.” Brooke nudged, leaning smugly into his personal bubble. “You two would be such a cute nerd couple.”

Jeremy’s heart flared, but all he did to defend himself was shriek back at her.

Christine giggled as she droned through his journal, plopped down on the ledge of the bed. Which he made up perfectly before they got here, because he couldn’t be a slob in front of other people. “I know, right?”

And here he was, about an hour after Brooke and Christine showed up, sitting awkwardly and watching his friends dig through private possessions like they were items on a cheap catalogue.

He didn’t really mind, Michael didn’t know Christine or Brooke well enough to talk to them on a daily basis, so he didn’t worry too much about word getting out. Plus, they were probably the two most trustworthy friends he had.

(Well, other than Michael of course, but Jeremy didn’t really know if he could call Michael just his “friend” anymore.)
He’d call Michael his brother, but with some recent developments, that’d just be weird.

They weren’t together, weren’t dating, but after eleven years together, he was basically on another level to everyone else, he made a completely new, very confusing category in Jeremy’s life just for himself.

Though, if they could pull back on the chastising, that’d be great. Jeremy felt like a twelve year old girl at a slumber party, gushing about who’s the cutest boy in the grade.

And to be fair, that was basically what they were doing. Ugh. And he’s the one being shamed because he apparently likes the ‘wrong’ cutest boy in the grade.

Luckily, to escape their passive-aggressive comments about how he’s apparently “so whipped”, Jeremy had his phone in hand at all times.

“**michael mellon; d U D E Today at 3:46**”

And, yes, he was texting Michael. Which wasn’t really helping Jeremy’s argument that he was not, in fact, “so whipped”.

“**jeremy queere; oh boy Today at 3:46**”

“**jeremy queere; What happened Today at 3:46**”

“**michael mellon; we’re almost at 420 on our sc streak :oooo Today at 3:47**”

Which Jeremy definitely was, by the way, but how could you blame him?

But it was whatever, he made sure to hide his phone’s screen from Brooke, just to preserve what was left of his dignity.

And Christine was too far away and too deeply immersed in the pages to even notice, so he was in the clear from her.

“**michael mellon; do you know what this means? Today at 3:47**”

“**jeremy queere; We have to get stoned? Today at 3:48**”
“michael mellon; i like ur thinking so that too but we should celebrate!! Today at 3:48”

“I can’t even read your handwriting.” Christine whined distantly. “Were you on a time crunch or something?”

Jeremy furrowed his eyebrows. “Maybe actually? I wrote some of them whenever Michael went to the bathroom, so.” he said

“Oh my God, Jeremy.” Brooke laughed.

“jeremy queere; Tf do you mean ‘celebrate’? Today at 3:49”

“michael mellon; celebrate, like go to dinner and shit Today at 3:49”

“jeremy queere; It’s just our snapchat streak? Today at 3:49”

“michael mellon; its a big milestone jer Today at 3:50”

“michael mellon; and i still haven’t spent the money dad gave me for helping him move Today at 3:51”

“jeremy queere; Wait you got money for that? I didn’t ;c Today at 3:51”

“michael mellon; i guess cause i did like eight days of work? youd only get like 9 bucks and i might’ve said that i was probably gonna spend my money on you anyway soo Today at 3:52”

It’s a stupid sentiment to be happy over, so Jeremy tried not to smile or blush at it.

But then he saw Brooke, who was sporting bulging eyes and the giddiest grin humanly possible, and that didn’t inspire confidence.

Either way, she chose to spare him and not ask questions about it, which he was honestly grateful for.

“michael mellon; not the point tho Today at 3:54”
Jeremy’s heart rate quickened, but he just simpered to himself and patted the keys quietly, trying to ignore Brooke’s very obvious giggling in the background.

“Jeremy Queere; Sure what time? Today at 3:55”

“Michael Mellon; how about ummm Today at 3:56”

“Michael Mellon; four? Today at 3:56”

“Michael Mellon; we can go to like sbarro or something Today at 3:57”

“Jeremy Queere; Sounds good man Today at 3:57”

Brooke leapt from the carpet onto his desk chair, preemptively resting her fingers on the glowing keys.

“Jeremy,” she said. She sounded bored. “Teach me how to play your geek-games.”

“Jeremy Queere; G2G teach Brooke what a keyboard is Today at 3:59”

Friday night’s dinner came, and it went.

That’s how things were between them, between Michael and Jeremy. They arrived, laughed and ate and lost track of time, like always.

So by the time they left Sbarro, it was almost six and the Sun was already setting.

Which, for the month, was normal— since it was almost winter— but that meant that Jeremy and Michael spent more than an hour in a half in a mall food court, just idly chit-chatting.

Again. They lost track of time. But that’s fine, it’s not like they had anywhere else to be, it was a boy’s night tonight.
Because tonight, Michael’s staying over. They haven’t for a week— scheduling issues and their homework load simply forbade it— so it’ll be good to catch up on some co-op *Halo 3* campaign and have another *Netflix* marathon.

Sure, after the incident at the party, Jeremy would get this superdrenal feeling, deep in his gut whenever Michael came to sleep over, but that’s fine.

Something about them being alone just triggered… memories. And that was fine, yeah, the wound was just fresh. Jeremy will get over it sooner or later. He could pretend that things are okay, for now. That seemed to be the case for a lot of things lately.

Besides, it’ll be nice to wake up in his arms again, to silently debate if it means anything, to know that it doesn’t.

You know, the usual.

It’s fine.

An hour of cheap, sugary candy bars for desert and intense, split-screen gameplay later, Michael laid back against Jeremy’s bed staring up at the ceiling. Doing nothing exciting.

That’s what he gets for dying mid-round, which, for the record, wasn’t Jeremy’s fault. Michael thought he could do some lonesome wandering of the map with no perks and depleting ammo.

Hint, he couldn’t, and ended up getting swarmed when he got to the courtyard.

“Fuck, Michael— why'd you have to— grr,” Jeremy grunted, hunching over the controller like a hawk. “*die* halfway through the round?”

Michael did not seem to care. He looked to Jeremy’s screen with the most unimpressed simper known to man.

Jeremy imagined that that was what teachers had to see everyday, and shivered. Why would anyone pursue a career in teaching, again? You’re either dealing with hyperactive toddlers or disappointed balls of angst and drama.

“Jer, you’re about to die too.” Michael warned, voice uncharacteristically calm and monotonous for what could be another high stakes play-through. His eyes were half-lidded as they flitted back to the ceiling.

Jeremy lost focus. Those words took a couple of seconds before they sunk in, but he swung back to the game and batted down the buttons. Why was he thinking about teaching, again?

“*What? How?*” Jeremy scowled, but Michael was painfully right.

He forgot to check one of his escape hallways in his little reverie, and by the time the zombies started zoning in, it was already too late.

There was just too many to kill, and at every corner there was just another mob encroaching on him.
“Fuck.” he said plaintively, as the bleeding GAME OVER text emblazoned the screen. The tension in his shoulders dwindled, and slowly turned into contempt.

He turned over to Michael, who again, was just looking up at the beige ceiling blankly.

Was he trying to sleep? Sure it was dark outside, but it was only eight, and he seemed so enthused earlier— just ten minutes ago he was raving about some weird documentary he watched and regaling crazy facts that Jeremy couldn’t remember anymore.

And he didn’t look tired. Maybe… bored? Sure watching someone else play could be, but he was never bored here.

This was their sanctuary, and he’s always liked playing video-games with Jeremy, even when he had to watch Jeremy play he provided some dramatized commentary in a fake English accent— Or was that not enough for him anymore?

Just… ask him, then. Jeremy reasoned, because that sounded easy enough, because it was the simplest answer, because something might be wrong, and if so, it’s best to try and talk it out.

And so, Jeremy’s furrowed, frustrated features slowly melted away, and instead he tilted his head and puzzlingly pinched his eyebrows together. He closed his mouth, thought of something to say, and just said it.

“— Hey, um, you ok?”

Michael snapped his head to Jeremy almost robotically. “Oh! Yeah. I just… got a lot on my mind, sorry.”

Because that didn’t sounded suspicious at all, Michael.

“You wanna— er, talk about it?” Jeremy prodded.

Michael sat up, and for a second, his eyes drifted downcast, off Jeremy, and for that same second, he looked like he might’ve considered it.

“Actually, I’d just like to stop thinking about it.” Michael concluded.

Jeremy tilted his head and wrinkled his nose.

“I brought my pot with me.” Michael blurted, still too casually as his eyes moved cursorily around Jeremy’s bedroom. “Err, but I don’t think I should smoke in your room.”

Jeremy’s incredulous voice went up above an octave, almost shrill. “You— what? You had it with you at Sbarro?”

“Oh, God, no. I kept it in my backpack n’left it here earlier.” Michael said.

“You know, that’s not any better.” Jeremy huffed. “I’m pretty sure it’s a criminal offense to have it at school.”

“I picked it up after school.” Michael rolled his eyes. “What do you think I went home for?”

“Clothes?” he suggested.

“Tch.”
Michael stood up, walking aimlessly towards the doorway. “I just think that I shouldn’t smoke it in
your bedroom— you don’t really have any candles here and um, your dad might catch on.”

“Candles make me sneeze, okay?” Jeremy complained, sinking into the beanbag. “What do you
wanna do, then?”

“We could… go outside, like on the roof? You have that little spot outside your window.”

“But it’s freezing out!” Jeremy protested.

“Then take my sweater, I don’t really care. It’s Friday, I’m craving a hit right now and I don’t want
you to get in trouble.”

Jeremy scoffed. He should stage an intervention, Michael’s been smoking a lot recently, if those
philosophical texts at four in the afternoon indicated anything.

*Whatever.* Michael said he had something on his mind, and Jeremy wouldn’t mind getting high
right now, either. He didn’t *need* it, but it helped him relax, worrying all the time got exhausting.

“Fine.”

Michael scooped up one of his old long-sleeved shirts from his drawer in Jeremy’s dresser and only
got to slightly lifting the hem of his sweatshirt up before Jeremy mustered up enough decency to
jerk his head away from the sight. For the better.

Two seconds later, that same sweatshirt was thrown at his head, and Jeremy begrudgingly threw it
over his clothes.

It smelled like Michael, but that was unimportant. Of course it’d smell like Michael, Michael wears
it four out of the seven days of the week. Why didn’t Jeremy think of that before? Now it was like
Michael was *everywhere.* He should’ve just grabbed another one of his cardigans from the laundry
room, because this was a dangerous game to play.

“You can look, you know?” Michael snarked.

“Do you have a shirt on?”

“Does it bother you if I don’t?” Michael said, voice smug. “M’kidding, you can turn around now.”

There he was in the same spot by the door frame, standing in an almost completely black *shirt,*
other than the red New Jersey Devils insignia donned on the chest.

A shirt that, if Jeremy recalled correctly, Mr Mell bought Michael when they went to go to a game
together. He knew Michael didn’t really like it, since he wasn’t really interested in the *NHL* and it
was kinda tight, but he wore it for his dad, and just happened to ‘forget’ it at Jeremy’s, a *lot.*

“Dumbass.” Jeremy chuckled, but the butterflies in his stomach thought otherwise.*This boy.* “Is
that going to be warm enough?”

Michael didn’t respond. When Jeremy looked up at him after rolling up the sleeves to his hoodie,
he noticed something.

Michael was trying to look away.

Michael was blushing.

Michael was *blushing.*
But the thing is, Michael never really blushed.

There was something about his skintone, maybe, that just didn’t let the colour pink bleed through, but the most ‘blushing’ Michael ever did was a light brush of red across his cheeks when they kissed.

He never looked like he got embarrassed, even when he was. For the longest time, Jeremy envied that. School presentations would’ve been much easier if he was just like Michael, if he could just not get flustered.

But now? Jeremy realized that all this time, he was wrong.

Michael could blush, and he was blushing harder than he’s ever seen before.

“God,” he sighed, almost soundlessly, sucking in a breath.

Jeremy flushed too, but that’s probably because of the weird air stretched between them.

He probably wasn’t supposed to hear Michael, so he both thanked and cursed God for his keen hearing.

Then Jeremy snapped back, and frowned as his eyes scanned Michael up and down. A long sleeve shirt might’ve sufficed in September, but it was cold. “Is it?”

Michael shook back into reality, started rocking on his heels, and avoided all eye contact with Jeremy.

“No one gets cold when it’s seventy-two out, Jer.” he said, bee-lining to the window. “Let’s go.”

---

Smoking pot came easier to Jeremy after two months of practice.

Sure, he still coughed a little sometimes, especially when he accidentally breathed in more than he can actually take, or that one time he popped a mint before— because apparently that made the smoke burn in his throat three times as bad— but that was normal.

Michael coughed sometimes too, just really rarely, but he’s been smoking months longer than Jeremy has.

“I think that just about does it,” Michael said, parting his lips to let a weak plume of smoke dissipate in the frigid air. “You want anymore of this?”

Jeremy shook his head, his throat was scratchy enough already from all the yelling he did playing games earlier. “M’good.”

Michael shrugged, pinched the lit end of the joint, and put it back into his Dollar Tree box.

“Me too.” he murmured quietly. “Maybe I’ll make brownies.”

Then silence fell, again.
Silence, silence, silence, silence.

They’ve had these spans of awkward tension all night. and why? It’s like they couldn’t go five minutes talking to each other. There was more to do here! More to say and talk about, Jeremy just couldn’t find the words.

Quiet, with the same strained feeling along the edges. It could be worse, but it was taunting Jeremy. He couldn’t read Michael’s mind, but he could read his own, and it was loud and tried to fill the gaps by jumping to worst-case-scenario conclusions.

At least the high helped. Made it a little easier to bare when he wasn’t overthinking things so much.

His head fell onto Michael’s shoulder almost subconsciously. Jeremy then realized what he did, stifled a squeak, and froze into place.

Sure they were friends, sure they knew everything there was to know about each other and more, sure they’ve crossed way bigger lines than this, but things just felt different right now.

Innate, private, and fragile. Like a soft, waning warmth here just between them, a small spark of fire to fight against the cold world with, but still something so delicate that just Jeremy leaning his head onto Michael’s shoulder could snuff it out.

Trust, maybe.

Michael had to have felt him tense up, because suddenly, his hand took shape on Jeremy’s clavicle and rubbed small circles into his skin. He still tried to take care of Jeremy when Jeremy got anxious, like always.

It’s a reassuring yet painful reminder that they’re still friends, that anything that someone else saw as romantic or affectionate could easily be explained through their eleven year journey together.

But Michael didn’t say anything, so Jeremy won’t say anything, or move anything. So it was fine.

“It’s um, really pretty out.” Jeremy breathed. He needed to say something, just for some levity. Sure the words sounded forced, but, on some level, he meant them.

It was nice out, despite the cold, and if he wasn’t so focused on the slow rhythm of Michael’s chest rising and falling against his back, maybe he’d take in the full beauty in his surroundings.

“A…” he started, piecing together a sentence. “A lot of stars.”

“Yeah. They’re pretty.” Michael said, unusually quiet, but since they were so close, his voice still resonated in Jeremy’s ears. “Can’t believe we actually came out here to smoke.”

“It’s freezing. You’re welcome.” Jeremy huffed, his eyes warily edging to Michael’s. “And— um, thank you, for letting me borrow your sweater.”

He could feel the thick air of intimacy bleeding out in his words. He wondered if Michael could feel it, too.

Maybe it was the eye contact. It had to have been, there was no other reason.

“It’s just a sweater, man.” Michael chortled nervously.

“But it’s yours, and it’s really warm, fuzzy too.” said Jeremy, not really knowing what he was
saying or if he should be saying it. He nuzzled into the fabric and dug his chin into the neckline. “So thank you.”

Man, under the shirt smelled even more like him.

“Dude, you’re already high? I’m almost jealous.” Michael chuckled, his hand patting Jeremy’s back.

“Am not. I’m not that much of a lightweight.” he said, giggling incessantly, not providing the best evidence for his case, but whatever.

Even when the dim light source was just some soft yellow backlighting from the bedroom window, Jeremy could still see Michael’s signature smirk.

“Prove it.” Michael said, proudly. “Erm, here. How about you recite some lines for me?”

Jeremy squinted at him and scoffed. “Lines?”

But, Michael looked serious about it. His jaw was sharp and high, eyeing Jeremy with smug suspense.

“You know. From the play you’re starring in.”

Maybe he was just looking for something to do to kill the time, maybe he, too, was fed up with these terse silences.

Fine, Jeremy will play along. “Alright, er, what’s a good one to start off with?”

Jeremy, with his dry throat, wasn’t even going to be attempting an impression of his character right now, that sounded like a lot of work. But he did manage the very basic task of remembering some very particular lines.

“Um, Amelie, I noticed you haven’t spoke of your husband lately,”

Michael’s brows hiked up in the corner of his watch, and Jeremy’s voice started wavering.

“I— um, did something happen, my dear?” he continued, pitch getting higher as Michael’s skeptical eyes bore holes into his skull.

“Oh, so you chose that specific line? I see what you’re doing, Jer.” Michael whispered, mouth dangerously close to Jeremy’s ear. Jeremy gulped, shivering.

Michael propped himself back onto the wall, leering. “Let’s not talk about him, shall we? I’d like to hear more about your recent business expenditure.”

Every word leaked with something dangerous, every word sounded corrupt grit between Michael’s teeth. He kept his eyes on Jeremy’s and somehow, didn’t stammer.

“I’m sure you would.” Jeremy swallowed down, sounding downright wrecked. Nervous, because he knew what was going to happen next. He was the one who orchestrated it, after all.

Michael pressed into Jeremy just like how Jeremy pressed into Michael.

And it was supposed to be short—a brief peck during act two that lead into the next scene where Amelie’s husband is dispatched and sent home—but Michael turned it into something more.
“I’ll be honest—” Michael hummed between slow, chained kisses, bleeding into each other and then some. “I really missed this.”

“Me too.” he mouthed back, flushing. “Surprised we — waited this — long.”

It’s like Jeremy was asking Michael to break him, to tear him apart, and sure, maybe that’s what Jeremy wanted all along. He asked for this, after all, he specified these lines, he knew there was a kiss in this scene, he knew Michael would do this.

It was like Jeremy was a masochist. Being so close was what hurt most, and yet, and yet.

He put himself in this position again and again.

It really hurt. It really fucking did. More than usual, almost. Jeremy could pin it to playing checkers, and coming to that daunting realization that no matter what he did or how long he spent thinking about it, there was nowhere he could move, there was no possible future where he wasn’t doomed.

Jeremy lost every time this happened, but he still played, just for the enjoyment, just for the thrill, just for the chance that he felt something more.

Trapped—even though he had the key to freedom, even though he could stop this anytime he wanted—he was still trapped.

It’s like glass shattering, every single time, but he just kept buying into it. An addict, tethered to something that was killing him.

So no, Jeremy didn’t stop it. His hands explored down Michael’s neck, across his shoulders, fingers fraile and gentle. Like he was afraid of himself, like pushing too roughly would break Michael, too.

Then he curled into Michael’s collar, hiding his face shamefully.

He didn’t want to see him right now, his eyes were getting bleary, and soon enough he was blinking away tears. Michael shouldn’t see him right now, he might think something was wrong.

Which, of course, there wasn’t. Nothing’s wrong, and if Jeremy repeats it enough, he might finally believe it.

Something wet pressed against his forehead, and Michael’s hand laced delicately into his own. On its own, it was cold, but their combined heats made it something greater.

Things are okay. Michael’s okay, so Jeremy’s okay.

That’s how it was supposed to be. That’s how it was. It all meant nothing, and that was fine with Jeremy. Why wouldn’t it be? Because IT HURTS?

He’s fine. Really. So fine. Really, really fine with everything. It didn’t hurt at all, he’s just being dramatic because he has a little crush, that’s all.

But maybe because Jeremy was high it just slipped his mind.

It. The thought. The sentence. Every dangerous word that comprised it.

It. The knowledge that no, things aren’t okay, that Michael might be, but Jeremy isn’t. Nothing is fucking fine.
The need to tell Michael that he’s in pain, that just being here cuddled up with him is a living hell, because they were best friends, who told each other everything.

“I wish this was all real.” he breathed, before he realized the disaster tumbling out of his mouth, before his LAWS and BARRIERS could stop him, before he knew what it’d mean, before the bottom of his stomach dropped out, before it was too late—

“Me too.” Michael said, and before he could pick apart those words, before he could unfurl every last repressed emotion, a ruined Jeremy mumbled out. “You better not be joking.”

“I’m not.”

Time around them seemed to freeze in place. The wind stopped too, for them.

Jeremy pulled back slowly from Michael. Lost but found, scared but brave, broken but fixed, he’s nervous and vulnerable, but too deep in to stop himself anymore.

Because maybe Jeremy didn’t have to get over him, after all. Maybe this didn't have to be snuffed out.

He saw Michael there, back still against the wall, shoulders squared and tense, eyes watery, gelled hair disheveled, and an unreadable hodgepodge of emotions teeming out of his skin that Jeremy couldn’t pick out if he tried.

But there Michael was, a patchwork of feelings looking at Jeremy, too, like he was lost, like he was broken, like he was scared and nervous and vulnerable, like he was trying to figure out what to do next, too.

There’s something else there, in his eyes. It’s something distant and longing and so many other things that Jeremy just didn’t comprehend but so badly wanted to.

Something else that he just couldn’t figure out, but it was something else that Jeremy’s seen before.

But he didn’t let himself overthink that. He didn’t think at all, he just tilted his head, and kissed Michael.

He didn’t really like initiating kisses anyways. Made his stomach twist with guilt.

He’d worried, somewhere buried really deeply, that Michael would shove him away, that he didn’t want things to be different between them. But he didn’t, he pulled Jeremy closer, onto his legs with a soft smile.

Michael changes, Jeremy changes, and things between them can change, too. Maybe… maybe he shouldn’t be so afraid of it. Maybe he should’ve never been afraid of it.

Someone might say it was messy, awkward, that their noses were bumping too much or that they should slow down, but it was fueled by a mutual want for more, by a mutual understanding that this isn’t fake anymore.

Their first real kiss. It put every other kiss Jeremy’s had to shame. They were all wrong, and this? This was right.

It’s surreal, a firework show in Jeremy’s violently thumping chest, an epiphany that everything
Jeremy’s wanted, Michael wants too. It was the more that Jeremy always wanted, that he always was left hungry for.

When they parted, Jeremy was breathless, panting off of almost nothing by their standards. He let his back fall against Michael’s side, his head skywards.

For once, Jeremy didn’t care if this was normal or not. He finally felt okay.

So they sat there, in silence, leaning into each other with their backs against the brick of Jeremy’s house.

That’s when the anxiety and self-doubt kicked in. Because there was silence, stretching between them again, in the aftermath of something that they very desperately needed some communication on.

It would’ve been a peaceful night, it would’ve been quiet, if not for the constant buzz in Jeremy’s head repeating: *what the fuck just happened*.

Noise was something Jeremy dealt with everyday. He’s actually pretty sensitive to it, and sometimes takes short bathroom breaks when and if a class got too loud, but now, in its absence, Jeremy actually missed noise.

He tried not to look like he was panicking as he counted the stars for refuge, but Michael probably wasn’t watching him, anyways.

Did he think that was apart of Jeremy’s script? But there was no way, they *read* both acts out together multiple times. Why was he being so nonchalant about this? Did he think Jeremy didn’t want to talk about i—

Michael harrumphed. “So, um, do you wanna talk about what just happened?” he said, sheepishly.

“Oh thank God, I was worried I hallucinated or something on laced weed.” Jeremy wheezed. Then, “Um, yeah, we— we should talk about that.”

Michael chuckled. It had some uneasy edge to it, but when Jeremy looked over to him, he split his mouth into a warm smile, eyes blown and loving. Clearly, he didn’t know what to feel right now either.

There it was again, that *something else*, just a small spark in Michael’s eye, but constantly there. Jeremy’s hands got shakier, and his cheeks got hotter.

“That *did* just happen right? I heard you correctly?” Jeremy blurted, unsure if he was breathing anymore over his thrumming chest.

Michael laughed harder this time. It sounded fuller, more genuine. “Ye– yes, Jer. I, I kind of y’know.”


*God, this dumbass doesn’t know how to talk about his feelings.* Jeremy thought, even if that was a little hypocritical. *But I love him."

“Me too.” Jeremy said, softly, readjusting himself so he could see Michael better, tête-à-tête. He didn’t really know what and if there was a correct way to start this conversation off. “So, how, um,
how long have you been feeling this way?"

No, there was no non-awkward way of talking about this. They were both blushing, Jeremy was a stammering mess, and neither of them had any experience with this before.

But Michael still looked at him like he hung up the Moon. He melted, into a puddle, like the that witch from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, his pupils probably turning into little hearts.

“Hm? Oh, well, I– I guess I don’t really know.” Michael said. “Um. I could say like, three years or three months, and both would be pretty accurate.”

He scooted a little closer towards Jeremy. Even though they weren’t touching, Jeremy could still feel Michael’s body heat radiate off him, bathing him in a feeling so intense that he couldn’t even feel the cold outdoors anymore.

“What do you mean?” Jeremy asked.

“I mean like, it’s always been there? Just really small, if that makes sense.” Michael explained, and when it didn’t, he continued. “Remember Valentines Day like, two years back? We got the ‘couples discount’ at the movies, and for some reason, I just couldn’t stop thinking about it.”

Jeremy remembered that. He remembering trying to talk about the film on the car ride back, but Michael seemed totally uninterested in it, phasing in and out of conversation. Jeremy then, just assumed he was upset. Stargazing out the window without any headphones, but still ignoring Jeremy’s attempts at conversation.

Maybe Jeremy could find a new meaning behind that story, one where Michael was in a twist over some stupid discount deal for a fake holiday, where Michael was reminded of feelings he didn’t want to have.

Like how Jeremy’s life has been these past two months, like how sometimes he resorted to neglecting Michael, sometimes for days.

“I forgot about it sometimes, though. There were just moments when it came up.” he mused. “Like I had to try not to stare you down in the changeroom a couple of times.”

Jeremy couldn’t believe this was happening, still. It’s like his heart was finally free— and maybe it was, maybe it’d leapt right out of Jeremy’s throat. But he just couldn’t stop smiling, he felt weightless, happy, like anxiety didn’t exist anymore.

“Fucking, remember the first time we went to that new Dave & Buster’s? My heart, Jeremy, my heart. I thought I was going to die, you looked so fucking happy.”

Nerd.

Jeremy giggled, spurred-on by gushing euphoria while heat waxed into his cheeks. Out of instinct, he tried fighting it down, but then he realized. Blushing is something he didn’t have to ignore or hide anymore, he could just allow it to happen. What was it gonna do? Make Michael suspicious that he might have a crush on him?

“But um, I just ignored it, until they just gradually started happening more and more.” he said, slowly, picking the words one by one as if he’s going through the story in his head. “Eventually I just came to the conclusion in like, mid-freshman year that I, y’know, had a crush on you.”

His voice waivered uneasily at the last sentence. He wasn’t scared, but definitely nervous.
Sometimes his eyes would dart away from Jeremy, adrift, up to the sky or sunk towards the grass.

Jeremy looked down to see his hands—slightly shaking—in his lap fidgeting with each other, he didn’t even remember when their hands had separated, but he didn’t like them being apart.

So Jeremy did what any reasonable person would, and held them, looking up to Michael with starstruck eyes, both for reassurance, and to reassure him.

“I- I uhm, didn’t really know what to do at first. You matter more to me as a friend, so I guess it wasn’t that hard to ignore.

“I already knew I was gay, so it didn’t really affect me too much. It was just always there, in the back of my mind. I didn’t like it, but it was apart of me.” he said, then his eyes fell to their interlocked hands, and he smiled, again. “God. I can’t believe this is even happening.”

“M—me neither… and um, if we’re being completely honest here, you might’ve started my sexuality crisis.” Jeremy admitted, sheepishly scratching the back of his head.

“Pft.” Michael chuckled, rolling his eyes.

A pause. then, when Jeremy’s blush got redder and his mouth stayed closed, Michael’s eyes widened.

“Wait, are you trying to stroke my ego right now or are you being serious?” he asked, incredulously, getting the hearty, small slap on the shoulder that he deserved.

“Sparked Jeremy Heere’s bisexual awakening. I think that’s going on my résumé.” he mumbled.

“Oh shush, you’re just… amazing,” Jeremy sighed, breathy and high. “and super-duper lovable, if you weren’t aware. How can you blame me?”

He melted into Michael’s side. He knew how pink he must be right now, but it didn’t matter if Michael saw it or not. It wasn’t suspicious, because he knew now why.

“Says you, Jeremy Heere. The icon who stole me a stuffed husky with makeup on it at the fair just because I said I wanted it. You’re literally perfect.” Michael murmured, kissing his forehead, which Jeremy leaned into, knees suddenly weak.

Someone thought he was perfect. Michael thought he was perfect. Maybe Jeremy could too, with time. Things change.

“I’m curious though, how’d this bi-awakening”—he said, in air-quotes, because Michael’s a dork —“go?”

For a moment, Jeremy shifted uneasily. Michael’s story sounded like smooth-sailing, but on his end? The last two months have been a living hell.

It blended together now, so much so that in retrospect, Jeremy could hardly put together a summarized timeline. What things was he supposed to leave in and what things was he supposed to leave out?

“Oh, erm, I guess I got pretty freaked out when I first realized, um, things.”

To put it lightly, Jeremy didn’t say, but to be fair, it all felt like a long lost, amnesic memory right now, or a nightmare. His suffering felt worth it now, because here Michael was, smiling at him
affectionately, holding his hand, liking him back.

“*Things?”* Michael asked incredulously, quirking an eyebrow.

But he was still a cocky prick. That never changed.

Still, this, Michael, love. It gave Jeremy the confidence to think things, feel things, and like things
that he’s never allowed himself the pleasure of before.

It’s an overwhelming high, separate from the weed, unless weed made your heart rate jump to
heights never before seen by man and make you feel like you were free and on top of the world.

“Y’know. Love or some shit.” Jeremy giggled back.

“Details, Jeremy, *details.* Hit me with ‘em.”

Jeremy looked out onto the suburb roads, trying to find his words. Empty, besides the occasional
street lamps, but it paved a horizon line into the star-filled sky.

Then his eyes lead him back to the comforting sight of Michael’s hands in his. For a second, he
worried that maybe his palms were getting too sweaty, but then he remembered that they’ve held
hands thousands of times before, and even if this felt different, Michael tolerated his clammy hands
no less.

“I mean, um, okay. I guess I was in denial for a *really* long time.” he started off, because that didn’t
sound too dumbed-down. “There were… some times, now that I think about it, where I’d have to
physically stop myself from thinking about boys, or well, you.

“Then we didn’t see each other all summer— which sucked by the way— and well, you changed a
lot.” Jeremy said, then, to correct himself, “In a good way. And I guess that’s what started it all. I
couldn’t get you out of my mind.”

“I thought at first that maybe I was just happy to see you again, but um, I started getting really
weird feelings, and I noticed things that I never noticed before.”

Okay yeah. He’s remembering those *things,* and he’s blushing, and trying to hide it by sinking his
face into Michael’s collar. Michael chuckled, and ran his hand through Jeremy’s hair. He could get
used to that feeling.

“What is it?” Michael asked, matter-of-factly. Jeremy took one split-second look up at him from
his neck line, and when Michael winked, he profusely shook his head. “C’mon, Jer!”

“Like… oh, fuck please don’t judge or hate me but—“ Jeremy paused, bracing himself. “did you,
did you know you sometimes, oh God, I can’t think of any other word to describe it, er… you
growl, when you play video-games?”

Wrong thing to say, or maybe just the right thing to say, because Michael started laughing,
bordering on hysteric.

*Wrong,* Jeremy decided, flushing with humiliation. *absolute worst thing to say right now.* He dug
deeper into Michael’s shirt, embarrassed. “You just do! Like you get really into the game and I
don’t think you realize it!”

“Dude, weird question, but er,” Michael said, his chuckles tuning out as he lowered himself a little
too close to Jeremy’s ear. “does that turn you on?”
Okay. That settled it. Jeremy wanted to die, right here, right now. He could hear Michael’s delighted grin just off his voice and hated the fact that he shivered because of it.

Mortified in front of his best friend— his boyfriend? What were they, again? Friends with feelings towards each other? FWFTEO?

He’ll find out later. For now he had to sit in his humiliation and silently pray for God to smite him.

“Michael!” Jeremy squawked— yes, the answer was yes, they were weirdly attractive to Jeremy and made him shudder in his seat whenever he heard them, but he was not about to tell Michael that. “Bad.” he said, swatting Michael’s arm blindly.

“Okay, okay! I’ll shut up, continue.”

It took a second to gather his bearings— thanks, Michael— and to find where he left off in his little monologue.

In all honesty, he’s practiced speeches so many times in the mirror, playing out hypotheticals and fantasies about what if he confessed to Michael— what he’d say, what he’d do, and how he’d do it — but he didn’t at all prepare for it to happen so soon. Or ever.

He also didn’t take into account that he was a stammering sap, or how in the heat of the moment, how he’d forget all his practice and just end up winging it.

“Ohm– yeah, so, it just, I started thinking— which by the way, I do not recommend— and there were just moments, y’know? Cuddling was cool when we were younger and when I didn’t have feelings, but waking up to you takes a fucking toll on me.”

Michael laughed. He squeezed his hand, telling Jeremy, sotto voce, that he shared the sentiment. Jeremy felt like he was glowing.

“Then well, I saw your pride patch, in your drawer at your house some time.”

“Pride patch?” Michael asked, squinting. It’s less of a question, and more of a what the fuck does this have to do with the story statement. His head tilted back, just so he could see Jeremy.

“Before it I didn’t know that you were gay, okay? It just, there was something about it that made me so confused. I hated looking at it because I’d just get sick, and I never really knew why.” Jeremy explained fastly, trying to be as honest as possible while also trying to hide how pathetic this all sounded.

Whatever. Michael knew almost every embarrassing detail about Jeremy’s life already, what’s one more to the list?

“Until?”

“Until well, you wore it to school, and fuck, remember the day I had to go home early?” Jeremy prompted, sucking in a breath.

“Yeah?”

“That one. That day I realized that I liked you. I guess I was so deep in denial that you just being gay, being an option, set me off.” said Jeremy, feeling a cocktail of emotions so potent it should be illegal. “The feelings were there, I just never wanted to admit them before.”
Jeremy, for someone who, just five minutes ago, could hardly process a single word in the English dictionary, rolled through his story insanely quickly, having tried to get it done and over with as fast as possible. Presumably so that Michael had no room to interrupt him and ask vaguely sexual, utterly humiliating, and downright distracting questions.

Speaking of which.

“Wait, pause. So you’re—you’re telling me an embroidered rainbow made you realize you’re bisexual?”

“I don’t know! I just, I think I hated it because it just reminded me of those weird feelings.” Jeremy defended. “And maybe I had some internalized shit or whatever, because it took me so long to just admit that I was even bi, but even then I started like, policing my behaviour.”

“Policing your behaviour?” Michael mimicked. “The fuck does that even mean?”

Jeremy’s segue proved to just be more self-destructive.

He let out a frustrated noise, somewhere in-between a squawk and a huff, before trying to speak again. “Like, I dunno, after I started liking you, I—I made rules for myself to not do certain things? There were like, a couple main rules.”

”Da Rules?” Michael turned his head, puzzled. “What were they?”

Oh, God, no, he couldn’t believe he’s telling Michael all this. Subconsciously, he really shouldn’t, but he’s on such a high that it didn’t even matter anymore.

“I think”— No, he knows, but Jeremy wanted some sort of safety net to back up onto if this all goes south— “I wasn’t supposed to come out to you, then—”

“Wait, why?”

“Rude, I was speaking, and I guess the logic was that if you knew I was bi, then you’d realize that I was acting weirdly around you and connect the dots.”

“Oh. Well, you told me, and I didn’t.”

Jeremy breathed out his laugh, too nerve-wracked and concentrated to muster up any other sound. “Anyways, and by the way, this is so fucking embarrassing for me.”

He was glad he was breaking down walls. He was glad he’s trying to be transparent. He was glad that he finally got to tell Michael this whole story after two months of keeping everything locked up in a journal.

That didn’t mean it was easy, though.

“I can tell by your face, but I think it’s cute.” Michael quipped, and Jeremy was pretty sure that he was just lying to make him feel better. He scoffed. “Uh you won’t, after I tell you the rest.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “Drama queen, but bet.”

“Rule two I think was like, ‘don’t think about him romantically’, or something. Then another was ‘don’t say shit that will give you away’, and oh, yeah. I also wrote that er, to not think about you… sexually.” he said, fast, so fast that hopefully, if God had any mercy at all to spare on Jeremy Heere, Michael wouldn’t hear it.
But Michael’s growing, shit-eating grin didn’t inspire confidence. Even if it did still light a warm, yet infiltrating glow in Jeremy’s chest. “So?”

“So what?”

“Did you?” he prodded, winking.

There was a short grace period Jeremy took for granted before his eyes widened and he realized what Michael meant.

“Did I wha— oh fuck off!” he shoved his side. “Jerk.”

Michael seemed unaware and unaffected by his best friend dying of mortification right beneath his nose. “Fine fine, I was just curious. But we’re definitely talking about this sometime.”

Jeremy hid his hot face with his hands.

He hoped Michael wasn’t too serious, because if he brings this up again, there’s a seventy-percent chance that he might have to literally call an ambulance. If someone could physically die of mortification, it’d be in that moment right there, with Jeremy Heere on the stretcher, and Michael Mell with blood on his hands. “Fine.”

He’d die with a flustered red face and an awkward boner. His last words would be “Screw off, Michael”.

Michael smirked. It seemed like that everytime Jeremy looked up at Michael, he had the same, taunting snigger on his face, just waiting to be kissed off.

“Also your rules did not work like, at all.” Michael grinned.

“Well they did for a little while.” Jeremy protested. “I could ignore it... most of the time. Sue me, it’s just a little hard to not think of you romantically when we were literally kissing almost every fucking day.” he huffed.

“Dude, did we literally do that just so we could kiss each other and it not be weird? Or were you actually doing it for extra practice for play rehearsal?” Michael asked.

“Okay, first off, don’t say ‘it wasn’t weird’, friends don’t make out with each other.” Jeremy said. “But uhm. Yeah. I had a huge fucking crush on you, you expect me to say no to a chance to kiss you?”

Jeremy smiled, tightening his grip on Michael’s hand, he shimmied closer to him.

“The practice part is a good plus though. Honestly though, I’ve kissed Madeline like twice so far, and it isn’t nearly as good.”

Jeremy leaned a little closer, just to softly graze Michael’s plush lips. It’s surreal, how good something so simple felt.

This wasn’t fake anymore. Jeremy repeated that over and over in his head, and he actually fucking believed it.

Michael complied easily with the peck. It was gentle, sweet, and short, but it meant so much more. If he died right here, right now, he’d die a happy man.

“If I’m really honest though, this did jack shit for rehearsal. Stage kissing is all pretending it’s
passionate, not actually doing shit.” Jeremy hummed. “But i-if you think I was gonna ever tell you that, you’re absolutely wrong.”

“Yep, I’m gonna keep it real with you, I suggested it just because I wanted to kiss you. And your reactions to it are kind of hot.” admitted Michael shyly. “And because I was hoping you’d realize that I liked you because holy fuck, confrontation is scary.”

It made sense. The afterparty incident cemented the possibility. There were definitely moments where Jeremy thought that just maybe, he liked him back, where he was at least skeptical.

Just, they weren’t moments convincing enough to warrant a confession, as much as he regretted waiting this long.

“I know.” Jeremy murmured,

“Was it worth the wait, though?” Michael asked, voice lined with hesitation.

But Jeremy’s answer was quick and steady. He’s just so sure of this, he didn’t care that things were different, either.

“Holy shit, of course.”

He tilted his head again, pressing back onto Jeremy’s mouth. Jeremy slanted his jaw to the side for easier access, and looped his arms around Michael’s waist.

“I’m really happy, Jer. I don’t think you understand.” he mumbled.

“Pft, are you joking?” Jeremy crooned, baby blues widened in awe as he looked Michael up and down.

They were so close, he could hear Michael’s slow-paced breathing and feel a soft, warm gust of air against his neck with every exhale. Jeremy didn’t even remember when he’d climbed onto him, but judging by their tangled legs, he had. “But um, I just wanna clarify… does this mean we’re dating?”

“Jeremy Heere!” Michael gasped dramatically, falling back against the brick with his hand over his head. “Are you asking me out?”

Jeremy giggled. Of course, it was all in good fun, but there was a slight, antsy nerve in his laugh.

Were they dating? Were they going to? Or was Jeremy rushing into this? Did Michael even want to go out with him?

Maybe Michael saw the slight frown. Maybe he didn’t, his eyes were slowly fluttering shut and he looked buzzed out of his mind to notice, anyways. It’s just, what Jeremy knew now, better than ever, was that Michael wasn’t doing any of this to try and placate him. He did things because he wanted to. Not because of pity.

“Jeremy, fucking, I can’t even find the words. Yes, I want to go out with you.” Michael breathed, quieting all those qualms as his hands guided to the small of Jeremy’s waist. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Shut up, I just… doubt myself, sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Michael pressed, rubbing circles into his back.

Jeremy hadn’t realized how little moments early in the morning or when they got stoned were the
only times where Jeremy heard Michael’s voice like this. Lazy, but thick and gravelly, compelling
and fond. It’s a sound that Jeremy felt like he could fall into.

“Fine. All the time.” Jeremy hissed. Michael laid slack against the brick house, red eyes slowly
opening and closing, while Jeremy sat on his legs, silently wondering if his weight was hurting
Michael, silently wondering other things, too.

“Oh, and uh, speaking of self-doubt, I might have another question…”

Michael’s throat let out a noise. It sounded sort of like a “Hmm? ”.

“…did you completely know about the… the um, hickey thing?”

Michael’s eyes opened cautiously, squinting at Jeremy with a conceited mirth.

“Oh, definitely. Just never knew how to bring it up.” Michael said, shrugging. “I knew you knew
that I did it, but honestly at the time I was way too hungover for that kind of talk so early.”

Despite Michael’s weed-induced lazy tone, he was still blushing. It’s a pretty mix of red and a
pinch of pink, and it looked good on Michael’s skin.

“Me neither honestly. I downed like, half the shit in your medicine cabinet and still wanted to jump
out a window.” said Jeremy, clammy hands shaking, body and skin warm even in the frigid air.

The clarity was nice though. Jeremy still had a couple more things to ask, some about particular
memories (to which Michael probably didn’t remember anyways), but most questioning whether or
not this was real life because still, he could not fucking believe this.

They could wait though. He just wanted to sit in this moment, maybe live in it forever.

“Nice work with the band-aids though. Don’t cover them next time though.”

It’s a pointed addendum, there’s no denying that.

A tiny voice, the one he’d usually be suppressing by now, piped up, and Jeremy’s eyes lit like if it
was Christmas morning and he wasn’t Jewish. “Next time?”

Michael lapsed. “Am I getting ahead of myself? I mean er—“

“Smooth, Micah. And yeah— I’m — um, down. It’s just rare I get to see you doubt yourself.” he
chuckled.

Michael scoffed, offended. He eyed Jeremy warily, just for a moment, before furrowing his
eyebrows and diving in for another kiss.

They found themselves back in Jeremy’s bedroom an hour later, per Michael’s complaints that
“Jeremy’s hands were just too cold” with new, surprise mosquito bites littering their bodies.

“I thought mosquito season was done,” Jeremy frowned, scratching himself. “I think one got under
your hoodie and raided my body.”
“Weren’t you wearing a shirt under it?” asked Michael, his voice sounded blank, but Jeremy couldn’t imagine that watching him apply dabs of calamine lotion to three little itchy nips across his arms was that entertaining.

“Yeah, exactly, but these little pricks can apparently bend reality.” he huffed, but then he noticed Michael’s staring from across the room. “What’s the sitch?”

“Oh, um.” Michael said, shaking himself alive. “Guess I’ve just never seen you wear anything like it, but oversized clothing looks really good on you, Jer. Specifically, my oversized clothing.”

Jeremy flushed. He found out tonight that praise was something his boyfriend Michael basically specialized in.

Boyfriend. Still, Michael being his boyfriend felt like a dream. He dug his nose into the neckline and breathed him in.

His boyfriend Michael, and okay, maybe he shouldn’t be calling him that so early on, because they haven’t really gone on any first date yet or told anyone else that they were dating, but Jeremy was still riding this high, headstrong and sort of delirious, and couldn’t get the word boyfriend out of his mind.

He knew he was head over heels, completely and utterly, but it was over Michael Mell.

Michael Mell, who Jeremy could always trust, who had a secret love for basketball, who accidentally shaved off half of one of his eyebrows one time in the seventh grade in attempts to make them thinner, Michael Mell, who almost split his head open trying to impress Jeremy on a skateboard trick gone wrong. That Michael Mell.

He let his face sink into the red hoodie. Michael’s red hoodie.

Jeremy’s best friend Michael, who has been in his life for eleven years, who has basically turned into his weed dealer at this point, who he stayed up to three in the morning playing Monopoly with on more than one occasion, who gave him his second home and who almost always knew the right thing to say.

“You know, I’m right here, you don’t have to smell my clothes.”

Who he forgot was looking right at him.

Jeremy leapt, almost knocking over a half-full can of flat Pepsi on his desk with his two very frantic hands.

“S— sorry.” Jeremy giggled, nervously. “Forgot you were here.”

But, even though he should’ve, Michael somehow didn’t think it was creepy that Jeremy had basically submerged himself in his sweater. No, he stood up off the bed and enveloped Jeremy in a bear hug, probably squeezing out his vital organs in the process.

It’s hard to believe that this all started eleven years ago, just as a childhood friendship. Sure, they’ve had some intimate moments, sure they’ve made jokes about being together, sure, even Jeremy’s dad has had his own doubts. But up until three months ago, Jeremy still thought he was straight.

It was funny, the insane type of funny that you can’t really believe until you see it for yourself, just how things changed so quickly. Sophomore year started off with Jeremy having weird, new,
foreign, changed feelings towards someone who had always been the same in his life.

A month of “platonic” kisses, flustered journal-entries and mental breakdowns later, he was being cradled in Michael’s arms, swaying together in a perfect vigil, a feeling of absolute fulfillment unwinding between them.

“Hey Micah?” Jeremy asked sleepily, his hands curled around Michael’s neck, tugging him closer. “Is this going to mean anything tomorrow?”

Michael looked confused, tilting his head sideways. “What do you mean?”

Jeremy sighed, his eyes grazing off Michael’s shoulder and onto the bedroom floor. This was where they first kissed. Fake kiss, yeah, but that first fake kiss lead to a torturous routine that eventually lead to his confession.

He remembered it all. The preemptive stagefright. Michael’s suggestion that they just practice kissing. Jeremy digging his fingers into the carpet when it happened, in hopes he’d find something to ground himself. The sting of guilty emptiness afterwards that he learned to crave and fall into every time he saw Michael.

“This… feels a lot like a dream. How do I know this is real?” he whispered.

And it did. It felt so surreal. Too good to be true, and he’s had dreams about Michael before. He worried that tomorrow, he’ll wake up to realize that this was all one big feverdream and things will stay the same. Just thinking about it, going back a time where they weren’t together, tightened a knot in Jeremy’s stomach.

“Well, I don’t know how else to convince you, but it’s not.” Michael said, his voice so sweet and tender that Jeremy’s weak knees nearly bucked in on themselves. “I’ll send you a love you text tomorrow morning if you want?”

He flushed pink. Hearing Michael say ‘love you’ was really something he could get used to.

Still, he burst out giggling, cupping Michael’s face in his hands. His skin was warm. “Text? Just say it to me, idiot, you’re sleeping here.”

“Pft, whoops. I hope it’s not too fast but um… can I say it now?”

“Please,” Jeremy breathed, lips tantalizingly close to Michael’s, itching to just lean a little closer, but waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

“I love you.” said Michael, pupils blown.

That something else hidden in Michael’s eyes didn’t matter, not right now.

Even if the answer might be right in front of him.

“I love you too.”

There it was. Jeremy’s perfect moment to strike.
That night, just as they were heading to sleep, just as Michael kissed him goodnight and his bedroom was plunged into darkness, Jeremy finally realized something.

Dim window light sketched Michael’s outline. It softly shaded his skin and traced his wide-opened eyes and his beatific, affectionate smile; a face that Jeremy’s seen millions of times before.

But there’s something there, under Michael’s skin. Maybe it’s the glint in his eyes or the dimple in his cheek, but there was something else there beneath the surface.

It’s been there for as long as he could remember. Whenever Michael looked at him, it was there. Something that Jeremy couldn’t name, something never really talked about, but something he always saw.

That infamous something else.

That something else that took Jeremy’s breath away, that had him getting lost in Michael’s eyes, staring until he realized it got weird, leading to a six minute segue about awkward prolonged eye contact. Then silence, again, and there, in the silence, something else.

Something else, that something else, that Jeremy couldn’t pin for the longest time.

Maybe it was what made Jeremy fall in love with Michael.

It’s the way Michael looked at him, like he hung up the Moon, like he was some hero, like he was everything to him, that really should’ve gave it away.

Michael loved him.

And Jeremy should’ve known that already, if the blitz of kisses, declaration of love or that nerve-racking two hour long conversation tonight was any indication, but now, hours later, it’d finally sunken in.

Michael loved him, for real.

Jeremy’s eyes welled up with tears. He curled into Michael’s chest and dug his head under his jaw, blinking them away.

It’s just, what was so emotional wa that when Jeremy was little, he didn’t think anyone could love him.

That sounded harsh, but it was true. Jeremy figured now that maybe he got the idea from his parents, whose constant arguing showed him that, even after marriage, love didn’t really exist.

Or at least, that they didn’t love him enough to not fight. That really killed his self-worth, and sure, it sounded dumb now— adults had their own issues and lives that they needed to work through—but Jeremy was young and impressionable and didn’t have any other role models in his life but them.

So of course their fighting affected him. Sue a child for not being invincible. Even though they stayed together until he was fourteen, nights full of screaming and curses that Jeremy didn’t even know at the time made him grow up faster than he should’ve.

And whenever kids gossiped about crushes or there was a wedding scene on the TV, Jeremy ignored it. Thought it was silly. Thought love was just like Santa Claus, a myth just to make kids happy.
Years later, even in freshman year, he still kind of thought that way.

His mom leaving him cemented it into his head.

That he was just some unlovable creature, that there was something about his personality that drove people to hate him. Being a loser didn’t help, having one— maybe two if he’s counting his dad— person who cared about him sucked for the longest time.

But even if he had other people in his life now, he really didn’t care about popularity anymore. He got so caught up with the Michael situation that he forgot about trying to appease everyone else.

Funny, how that changed so quickly. Just in the span of two months.

But tonight, Michael loving him showed Jeremy that he was worth loving, that he didn’t have to depend on people liking him, that he could learn to love himself, too.

Michael was still here. Michael was still his best friend. There was just more there now. Things could stay the same and change at the same time. They’d still play video-games and procrasinate homework together, but now they could kiss and cuddle and go on dates and didn’t need to pretend that it was all fake anymore.

Because change happened, and that was okay. His parents divorced, and that was a hard change, but then again, so many other things changed.

High-school changed. His social status changed. Michael changed and things between them changed, too.

So it’s okay. Somethings change for the better, different didn’t have to mean worse.

“You okay?” Michael asked, softly. His fingers delicately brushed down Jeremy’s back and rubbed soothing circles into his skin.

Jeremy sniffled. He didn’t know when he started crying.

“I’m so okay, Micah.” Jeremy said, pressing a warm kiss to his cheek. “I’m the okayest I’ve been in a long time.”

Chapter End Notes

if u dont get the Da Rules joke im deleting this fic xoxo

anyway thanks for reading pls like comment subscribe and smash that notification bell to be notified everytime III upload a video
Jeremy woke up that next morning to a hand petting his curls, and a low melody ringing in his ears. 

*Fly me to the moon* was the first sentence he heard on that Saturday.

And it all fell into a rhythm: the soft touch, the slow sound, how it fit and flowed perfectly together, how it just felt right.

It followed a beat, a tempo, not too fast, and not too slow. Never had him wishing that it’d relax a little, never left him aching for more.

So he fluttered his eyes open, thinking about just how little he missed the ball of anxiety that welled up in his throat every other morning, and wondering where it went.

Michael was there, Jeremy realized, and maybe those two things had some sort of correlation, because most anxiety-free days always had certain special someone in them.

And here that special someone was, lilt scaling from lower and higher, humming to some track that Jeremy, off the top of his head, couldn’t pick out from their *Spotify* playlist.

*On Jupiter and Mars*, he said, or at least that’s what it sounded like. Some more muddled murmuring, then, *In other words, hold my hand*.

Jeremy couldn’t really tell exactly what Michael was singing. Sure he hasn’t listened to the mixtape in a while, but he never heard this one. It didn’t help that Michael dragged his syllables slowly and jumbled up the lyrics.

*In other words, baby, kiss me.*

But still, it lead Jeremy to a dull realization that drew a picture of yesterday night in his head. He knew now, why he was feeling so good— so *okay*— this early in the morning.

On the roof yesterday, just outside his window, Jeremy confessed to Michael, and Michael, Michael confessed *back*. They’d spent maybe two hours going in and out of light make-out sessions and explanations of tenacious little memories that should’ve been long-gone out of recollection by now, but weren’t.

Surprisingly, Jeremy didn’t spaz-out in bliss and accidentally kick Michael in the shin, nor did he skittishly leap out of bed and decided to fulfill his true passion as a streaker by running nude around the neighbourhood—
Nah, none of that, there was just a comfortable, warm giddiness that washed over his skin, and forked his lips into a smile. Especially as he blinked in the room, and blinked in the full picture of Michael laying idly in his bed, examining the lines on his hand like a palm reader as he crooned:

*Fill my heart with song, and let me sing forever more.*

Jeremy kept his breathing slow, paced, calm, because he was okay, and starting today, that wasn’t something that he needed to try to believe anymore, he just knew it, he *knew* he was okay.

*You are all I long for, all I worship and adore.*

So he didn’t panic, not at all, actually. Maybe it was just Michael’s smooth song that steered the morning air in the right direction. Collective, calm, harmonious, in order, *right*.

Jeremy watched Michael, in slight awe, tempted to try to harmonize with him, but, knowing how off-key his morning voice could be and how he didn’t actually know the rhythm, didn’t attempt it. He just sat and basked in the now.

But of course, he got caught. Maybe it was just his wide eyes awkwardly staring at him, but just a couple of short seconds later, the cadence in Michael’s voice dropped, and his head turned over curiously to Jeremy.

Michael’s hair was mussed, like most mornings— the leftover gel in his hair plus the tossing and turning he did overnight lead to a bedhead that looked like some sort of messy pompadour— and the creases around his mouth were stretched into a happy grin.

“Oh, hi. G’morning, Jer.” he yawned, his arm shrinking back from around Jeremy’s waist to rub his eyes.

And for a second, Jeremy did worry. A tipping point because of the way Michael looked at him. Blank, inattentive, and completely and utterly *normal*.

Nothing else, like a ghost town, like anything that was ever there before was just… gone.

It was a slight lapse of any peace inside where Jeremy’s emotions went absolutely berserk. A familiar torrent of anxiety swirled around in Jeremy’s stomach like poison.

It’s a serpentine darkness— frayed and scared and dreadful and pained and disappointed that he’d *let* himself believe something so stupid and unachievable— that coiled itself around his insides, and kept lunging at his heart, trying to pierce him with a shard-like tail.

In that split-second, Jeremy plummeted, and absolutely wanted to *die*, because death looked better than the embarrassment he’d put himself through. His blood ran cold, and he wondered— slightly hoped— if humiliation could be fatal.

He cursed how his actions had consequences. He hated how he fell into this like some fool. He felt his blushing skin turn cold, white, maybe even green, with just how sick he felt.

But then, maybe spurred-on by Jeremy’s sudden pallor, Michael’s hands danced down his shoulder, and his unfocused gaze landed on Jeremy’s face. He smiled, gently.

And there Jeremy was, frozen into place, though Michael’s skin on his was warm, burning even. For some reason, even if he’s seen that small smile a thousand times before, he couldn’t make heads or tails of it, he was just, confused.
That’s a first. But Jeremy imagined that there’ll be a lot of firsts in their relationship.

“How, don’t I owe you a declaration of some kind?” said Michael, cheekily. He didn’t have to say the word for them both to be on a mutual to understanding of what “some kind” meant.

That short slip of emptiness in Jeremy seemed like a distant memory. Swept away by something entirely new, and that tight snake morphed into a kaleidoscope of butterflies, fluttering out the dread from his stomach.

But on the other hand, in reality, there was Michael, laying next to him, whose face was twitching nervously. “That is, if you still want it?”

It’s a chance that normal-Jeremy would’ve never had the confidence to take, but now, it was like second nature. Jeremy’s hand reached up and cupped his cheek, his eyes softening, his heart pounding.

The room was silent, but impossibly loud at the same time. It’s a vigil that Jeremy didn’t want to interrupt, so instead of saying the word yes, like every single cell in his body was screaming to do, he just nodded.

Subconsciously his second hand reached for Michael’s under the covers, linking them. He wasn’t really aware that he was grinning, but judging by how the muscles in his face were starting to get sore, he’s been doing it for a while now. He might never stop, actually.

“Ho, wow, okay. Never thought I’d really be saying it to you like, ever, but um.” Michael breathed, pausing, as if he was trying to find the right words and the courage to say them. even if it was just three simple syllables.

“I love you.”

The warm kindled bliss inside Jeremy’s heart combusted, exploding like a bullet from a gun. He didn’t know why, but his first primal instinct was to hug Michael and dig his face into his neck, giggling.

Jeremy could fall apart in Michael’s arms and he wouldn’t really care, because he’d be here, where he felt at home.

“Um, I love you too.” he said, smiling against Michael’s skin. His voice was shaky, but he was just on the same page as Michael: in utter disbelief that he’d ever get to say that, to Michael, to anyone. Just generally, Jeremy never thought he’d get passed the Admire-From-Afar stage, ever.

“Sinta.” Jeremy remarked, it sort of just came out after he remembered that word, and the effect it’s had on the both of them.

Sinta brought him his first clue that Michael liked him back, and really, it shouldn’t have. Yesterday, Michael’s explained him thousands of moments that should’ve been red flags, but apparently, Jeremy was oblivious to all of them except sinta.

He’s stopped using it in the last couple of weeks, it felt a little harder to work into conversation naturally when he actually knew what it meant, but he still took immense satisfaction in seeing Michael freeze up or roll his eyes.

“What?” asked Michael, puzzled, tilting his head to the side.

“Sinta.” Jeremy simpered. “You’re my sinta.”
Michael blushed, to Jeremy’s surprise. He still had to get used to that sight. “You know that doesn’t actually mean jackass, right?”

Jeremy bit back the laugh bubbling at the bottom of his throat. “Mhm, so what does it mean, then?”

“Sweetheart. Or dear, or love. Just a pet name, really.”

Jeremy stared at him, knowingly. There’s a tangible mirth behind his eyes that he knew Michael could see, and he watched smugly as Michael’s face turned more and more suspicious by the second.

“But you already knew that, didn’t you?” Michael speculated aloud, grin curled thoughtfully, and when Jeremy giggled, he rolled his eyes. “I thought so.”

“Looked it up after the party.” Jeremy explained. “Can I call you it all the time?”

He was tired of being a coward, of not owning up to how he felt and just trying to hide from it. Michael showed him that maybe he didn’t have to.

“If you want.” Michael said, then considered something. When he looked down at Jeremy, he sucked in a breath and tousled Jeremy’s already bad enough bedhead. “Mahal kita, sinta ko.”

Jeremy didn’t have to know what it meant for his face to flush. He knew, by just how cool Michael’s chest was against his skin, that he was breaking into fever-hot temperatures. Michael could’ve insulted him, or called his mother a whore or something, but it’d still sound hot off his tongue. Something about foreign languages was so charming.

“What does that mean?” Jeremy asked, not really sure if he was supposed to be offended or flattered. Michael sucked in a breath and well, he hadn’t really realized Michael was doing it either, but apparently, he’d been staring, and he tore his eyes off Jeremy, flustered.

“Oh, right. Well er, mahal kita means I love you, and sinta ko means like, my love.” Michael explained, voice shy and unnevered.

Meanwhile, Jeremy’s insides were melting helplessly, because despite Michael’s wavering courage, that was probably the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to him, like, ever. “Mahall keeta?” he tried.

“Mahal, kita.” Michael repeated, slowly, but not mockingly, empathizing what syllables to exaggerate and which to keep curt. Still, he looked amused by Jeremy’s attempt at being cultured, or maybe that was adoration in his eyes.

“Mahal kita.” said Jeremy, more confident this time, more willing to take risks this time.

And seeing Michael’s ear-to-ear grin was a reward in itself. The way he softly said “You’ve got it,” like he wasn’t reduced to a happy squeak was just too cute.

“God, I’d love to kiss you, but my breath is rank.” Michael chuckled, sort of ruining the moment, but Jeremy wasn’t sure that was even possible anymore.

Probably the only thing that could do that was if Mr Heere came through the door and saw Jeremy curled up affectionately in Michael’s sternum, planting light, feathery kisses at the base of his neck.

That’d lead to a crisis-level situation where Jeremy would have to both awkwardly come out to his
dad, then explain that he and Michael were now (if this wasn’t one, big, crazy dream, which, right now, he was so starstruck he’s still not sure that it isn’t) dating. No thanks.

Jeremy heard Michael sniffing the air aimlessly. Then, “I also desperately need a shower, so,”

“Yeah you kind of do.” Jeremy laughed. “Guess I’ll get off of you, then.”

He rolled off Michael, almost falling off his bed in the process. The view of the floor reminded him of how normally, they never really slept in the same bed when he stayed over at Jeremy’s. Normally, on the floor, there’d be second mattress, where normally, Michael would sleep.

That was Jeremy’s mom’s fault. Of course, she never really liked Michael anyways, and now that he thought about it, she always seemed a little homophobic. God, it’d be funny to see her reaction if she saw them now.

When she was still around though, she was the one who deemed it inappropriate that two “growing boys on the cusp of puberty” shouldn’t have to share one twin-sized bed, especially with all the excess space in Jeremy’s room. She started the tradition of rolling in the second mattress whenever Michael stayed over.

And for some reason, they kept that tradition, even in sophomore year, even without Jeremy’s mom to enforce it anymore.

Maybe it was just because they were scared of change, but the rule was only broken when they were overly lazy or tired or if there was a thunderstorm.

(Because Jeremy hated thunderstorms, especially as a kid. They made for good cuddling sessions, though.

Actually, everytime Michael slept over, it made for a good cuddling session.

Damn, maybe Jeremy’s liked Michael longer than he thought.)

Down there, he also saw the small corner of a book. A green, hardcover book with a silver coil spine. His journal.

He didn’t want to know how many entries of just straight pining were written in there. They didn’t matter anymore, he didn’t need it to cope anymore, he didn’t have to censure or chastise or scold himself for feeling this way anymore.

Guess that journal was basically useless now, huh? Maybe he’ll burn it. Maybe he’ll show it to Michael. Probably not the second thing. Probably the first thing.

He’s had enough humiliation just from yesterday alone, thanks.

Michael clambered out of bed, scouring his drawer for some clothes and eventually fishing out a pair of sweats, a pair of boxers, and a tank top. He collected his red hoodie from the floor, and before he left, pressed a quick kiss to Jeremy’s forehead.

“We can do more later,” he promised, in a voice low, and soft. Rest assured, Jeremy’s nerves will never be the same.
Jeremy’s never really admitted it, but during middle-school, he had a small phase where the one thing he read were romance novels.

You know, the things chick flicks are based off of. No, he wasn’t really proud of it now, but back then, it was a simpler time, where anxiety hadn’t taken over every facet of his life and he wasn’t scared of simply entering the school library.

Or checking out guilty pleasure reads— and of course, he didn’t read anything often, but sometimes he’d hear about off-hand suggestions and popular reads through the internet and dive in himself. Like maybe five. Or six. Or more, but whatever, they were short novels anyways.

Just the whimsical up and down roller coaster, the flowery language, it had some sort of appeal, and a seventh grade Jeremy could set aside toxic masculinity just enough to enjoy them every once and a while. Plus, he always slipped off the cover, so no one really found out.

Point is: he’s always been a sucker for mushy happy endings, and damn, this felt like his happy ending.

See, Michael’s birthday wasn’t actually in the same year as Jeremy’s.

He was born two months before New Years, so technically, he should be in the grade above Jeremy, because that sounds like a simple construct to follow. It is a simple construct to follow: your birth year should match everyone else in your grade. Made it easier.

But apparently, the public education system didn’t get the memo. He wasn’t exactly sure on the rules surrounding when someone was supposed to be in grade X or grade Y, but Jeremy was grateful for them.

Look, younger-Jeremy wasn’t too different to freshman-Jeremy, they shared the same opinion in the sense that they were kind of terrified of the older grades. Call it what you will, but there was something just being one to two to three years older that was just terrifying. School was divided into an age-based hierarchy, and Jeremy respected that system.

It wore off in sophomore year after making some older connections off his new group of popular friends, but in some alternate universe where Michael Mell was just in the grade above his, he was pretty sure they never would’ve became friends, even if nothing else was different.

They met in kindergarten, at recess, and that wouldn’t have happened if they weren’t shoved into the same class. Since then, it’s been an eleven year journey, full of twists and turns and loops and changes.

(Sometimes, Jeremy wonders what it’d be like to live his entire life without Michael. If the school system went by birth year instead of birth season, if he never saw Michael outside of small glimpses in the hallway, if they never became friends.

He doesn’t like to think about it for too long, because a Michael-free lifespan looked bleak. Life without Michael was so hard to imagine, too, because almost everything Jeremy’s ever done, Michael’s been at his side with him.)

Anyway. Michael’s birthday. His sixteenth birthday. The one he’s been so excited about for
months because his uncle promised him to pass down his old cruiser when he gets his permit.

Jeremy’s happy that Michael’s so ready to start driving, because waking up extra early to catch the bus was starting to take a toll on him, and Jeremy won’t be able to start driving for another few months. He probably won’t get his permit then, either, ‘cause he’s kind of scared shitless about driving. The sooner Michael gets his license, the longer Jeremy could stall to get his.

But he’s getting off-topic again. It’s just, Michael’s birthday was coming up, and Jeremy had some weird intuition that told him he wanted to make it special for him. It was his sweet sixteen or whatever, it should be somewhat memorable.

November twenty-ninth rolled around the week or so after their confession. A Wednesday this year, and of course, Michael wasn’t just going to skip school because it was his birthday, so the day was pretty average for the most part.

Classes full of near comatose students passed by too slowly, lunch blew over too quickly, and really, the only thing that was different or interesting about Wednesday was how Michael wore a blue Birthday Boy! ribbon (ironically, but Jeremy loved that dork) to let everyone know who they were talking to. Their table got a kick out of it.

But still, things were aggressively normal at school, and they haven’t told other people that they were dating yet (albeit, Chloe had her suspicions), so any of the small tokens of affection Jeremy’s learned to love were restricted to off-hand compliments and some brief hand-holding under desks.

Jeremy looked himself in the school bathroom mirror later that same day, in sixth period. He was impressed to find his lips lacking their usual greyish tone, that they were pinker now. He didn’t look grave or gross or sad, like the reflection he’d gotten used to looking at before, like the way he’d been feeling before.

Sure, he still had sensitivity issues, sure he still got anxious about due dates and stressed over hallway hecklers and messing up social cues, but Jeremy wondered— yeah, it’s only been a week but— whether or not Michael had anything to do with it.

After school, Jeremy went over to the local Whole Foods, bought a cupcake from the bakery in there, and on his way out picked up some candles. He wasn’t really sure how he’d fit enough candles on the muffin, so he decided to pick up a Betty Crocker cake mix— in Michael’s favourite flavour, because he’s a good boyfriend— figuring that it’d be nice to have something to pass the time tonight, since he’s staying over.

And he also grabbed a tub of chocolate frosting. Because it tasted best on yellow cake, and ‘cause Jeremy loved frosting.

So Jeremy packed his bag around three thirty, after school ended, and said goodbye to his dad on the Mell’s doorstep at four.

Mr Mell’s home was big. It’s only been a month since the move, so it had that fresh, new house smell, and while some things might still be in Sellotape ‘d boxes, it’s, for the most part, well decorated. All the unpacked stuff was pushed off to the side and kept in storage closets, so it looked a lot more clean compared to the last time Jeremy’s been there.

Jeremy couldn’t say he loved the house, he was still a little apprehensive since he basically grew up in the Langit home, but it’s objectively nice. Just another change he had to get used to.

Michael was waiting for him downstairs. They gave up on the “Meet Your Guest At The Door”
rote that their parents used to make them do years ago, so really all he got was a text from him anymore.

Which meant he had to wander the house awkwardly on his own, trying to remember where the basement staircase was while Mr Mell watched him from the den, very obviously stifling his laughter.

“It’s to your left, Jeremy.” he said, eventually, after five minutes of mockery. Jeremy got the inkling that Mr Mell took some schadenfreude off his confusion. He knew Jeremy’s barely been here before.

“Thanks.”

Okay. He didn’t hate Mr Mell, nor did he really dislike him at all. He’s just always been a stoic figure in Jeremy’s life, a presence that he didn’t really associate with “warm” or “caring” or really much of anything. Jeremy didn’t really an opinionated stance on him, because for the most part, he’s been absent. He worked long hours and Jeremy hardly saw him, but from what he’s seen, he’s been pretty distant, quiet, but bold.

A hard worker, too, which Jeremy respected, but couldn’t relate to. Mr Mell brooded over coffee in the morning, left for work before Michael got to school, and didn’t get home until four at night. Sometimes later, if he went to go hang out with his friends, which he did a lot.

So yeah. It’s weird that he’s suddenly trying to have a personality, and make jokes— if that was what he was attempting, or maybe he just actually thought humiliating his son’s best friend was cool— because he never really did that before.

He and Mr Mell’s awkward relationship aside, the one thing Jeremy was happy about in this new house was how he and Michael got the basement to themselves.

In comparison to the rest of the house, it wasn’t that big, and they didn’t really have the entire thing, since there was a laundry room down there too, but that was partitioned by a big black curtain by the staircase, so Jeremy was still grateful.

He turned the corner from the stairs to meet Michael. Seated on a new beanbag— notably new, because there wasn’t any Dr. Pepper stains on it yet— checking his Instagram, scrolling absently. The television screen in front of him was on a dim standby, the console dashboard just awaiting its user to enter a game, and two controllers were sitting on top of the box.

The nervous tension in Jeremy’s shoulders from Mr Mell earlier unraveled the moment he saw Michael. Replaced by a steadfast, heady glow in his chest that made his problems go away and his smile widen, because laying there on the floor was his boyfriend, Michael.

Michael Mell.

Really, just looking at him doing very average things on a very average day shouldn’t make Jeremy’s heart start back up again, but it did.

“Hey,” he entered, leaning over, kissing Michael’s forehead, reminding himself that there was no pain anymore.

It’s just, so surreal, that he got to do this. That he could even call Michael anything more than a friend. But this was the new Jeremy. The sophomore Jeremy, who accepted change, even if that meant taking risks to stay true to his feelings.
Jeremy stopped thinking about that the instant he realized that Michael replaced his birthday ribbon with a *sash*. A blue sash that draped across his torso, and had little black stars on it. Jeremy didn’t have to tilt his head and read it to know what the writing said.

He gaped. “Oh my God—”

“Look I can explain,” Michael said quickly, noticing Jeremy’s eyes around his chest. Jeremy couldn’t help himself, he broke out in laughter. “I stopped by Party City on the way home and I just *had to*, you know?”

“What the *fuck*, Michael.” Jeremy giggled, shaking his bag off his aching shoulder before he plopped down on his haunches.

There was no *Party City* on Michael’s walk home, even on his route to Mr Mell’s. That meant he asked to go. Liar.

“It was like, *seven bucks*! How was I supposed to resist?” he said. “Fucking, respect the sash, Jeremy.”

Jeremy grabbed blindly for his controller and threw Michael’s into his arms, rolling his eyes. “I honestly can’t believe you sometimes.”

Jeremy was glad Mr Mell was such an old man.

Of course, not *literally*. He’s not that old, he just acted like he was. Mr Mell was barely middle-aged and yet, he went to bed like he was already in his seventies.

Jeremy supposed he needed as much sleep as he could get, since he worked most of the day and had an early wake-up call, but still, eight o’clock was not an acceptable bedtime for *anyone*.

Today, he retired especially early at five— his office was upstairs, too— and that was convenient, because while Mr Mell did his work and slept, Michael and Jeremy were busy in the kitchen.

Correction: not busy in *that* way. They decided to make good use out of that *Betty Crocker* cake mix, and Jeremy was still not sure how ‘*Yellow*’ constituted as a cake flavour, but it was Michael’s favourite, so he’d got it anyway.

Still, he thanked Betty Crocker, wherever her spirit may be, because she was the gem who gifted the world a cake mix product called *Super Moist*, saving the lives of half-assed comedians around the globe, like Michael. Her legacy, lives on.

“Are you gonna wipe that off your face anytime soon?” Jeremy asked, licking the frosting from out of the tub he also bought at *Whole Foods*.

Michael, for some reason, had a vendetta against frosting when it was on its own, and could never eat it. Apparently, as he claimed, it was just “too sweet”, but to Jeremy, that wasn’t possible.

Michael did like eating raw cake batter though, if the crusted yellow rim around his lip line was anything to go by.

“*I guess* I could,” he said, grating off the dried schmutz with a napkin. The serviette flew across the
kitchen, towards the open trash bin by the sink, and against all odds, Michael actually sunk it.

Then took another finger full of batter out of the bowl, repeating the cycle.

“I can’t believe you’re older than me.” Jeremy said, impatiently, waiting for the oven to finally ding. “You act like you’re six.”

Michael was sat on the counter while they waited. In the process of mixing the batter, they forgot to actually put the oven on, and Jeremy swore, they’ve been here for thirty minutes just stalling time until the oven reached a sweet 375°.

That’s fine though, there was a lot to talk about. Mostly, if it was too late to put pot in the cake, but Jeremy had to rule against it, despite Michael’s jokes about “actually getting baked”. Jeremy was pretty sure that it would stink up the kitchen with the scent of weed anyways, and he did not need Michael’s dad on his case right now.

“Hey rude, it’s my birthday.” Michael huffed, looping his arms around Jeremy’s neck. It wasn’t much, but Jeremy still found himself blushing. “You’re lucky you’re so adorable.”

Jeremy begged to differ, personally, but maybe giving flattery was just one of Michael’s kinks or something. If that’s the case, then receiving flattery was one of Jeremy’s.

“You never said that before.” grumbled Jeremy off instinct.

“Duh. You know how weird it’d be if I kept calling you hot all the time?” Michael giggled. “We were friends, what was I gonna say? ‘No homo but you’re so cute that I’d literally kiss you if you asked me to right now?’”

God, he was head over heels for this boy, if the solid red flush or the ear-to-ear smile on his face was anything to go by.

“Would’ve been able to do this a lot sooner.” Jeremy quipped, leaning in, tilting his head, and giving Michael a light peck. “You taste like cake mix.”

It still felt good, good enough that he lent back into another, and then another, keeping some chastity to the kisses, not letting them linger too long or get too intense, because they were in the kitchen, and really, if Mr Mell wanted to, he could come downstairs and see them like this at any moment.

They haven’t even told their friends yet, and most of them have been rooting for them to date for weeks now. Plus, another awkward confrontation with Mr Mell was not something Jeremy ever wanted to go through for the rest of his life. He’ll leave the reveal up to Michael.

“Good cake mix though?” Michael asked, smiling like the moron he was.

But Jeremy nodded, and just as he was about to dive in for another kiss, that damn insolent oven dinged. Couldn’t it see they were busy?

---

They decided to sit outside while the cake was baking. The Sun was already down when they got out there, and while it wasn’t freezing, Jeremy was happy that Mr Mell invested in a propane fire
The dusk November air was chilly, even for a boy knees deep in a thick sweater.

Still, there was something about cold nights. Maybe he was just reminiscent about last week, maybe every time he saw the reflective blades of grass below him or the grey-blue swirl of clouds skywards, it just brought him back to that special night.

_I wished this was all real._

He cuddled up to Michael on the porch furniture set. Since Mr Mell never really went out here other than when he had his friends over, most of the furniture was still wrapped up in plastic sheaths, but there was still a long, hanging porch swing, so that’s where they sat.

Me too.

Jeremy’s replayed that in his head dozens of times since it happened. The dialogue, the thoughts, the feelings, everything that happened that night. He worried then, and sometimes he worried now, if Michael really meant what he said, or if maybe. he was just doing this out of pity or humouring him because they were friends.

It sounded silly, but it wormed into Jeremy’s mind a lot more than he’d like to admit; something he thought about it for hours in the early morning.

Because sometimes, Jeremy was still convinced that he was living in a dream. That someday, he’d wake up, to find out that all of this never really happened. Frankly, he was terrified of that, but the last week has just felt too surreal, too good to be true.

Other times, Jeremy wanted to rebuild his walls— reassemble the defenses that had kept him safe from harm for so long— because God, change was scary. It wouldn’t take much, to just deny himself again, to protect himself, even if that meant hurting himself first, because at least that meant nobody else had the chance to.

Bottom line was that Jeremy still was afraid. It’s anxiety, and Jeremy never expected it to just go away after that night.

In all honesty— maybe it was just because he wasn’t actively trying to nauseate himself for having normal human emotions anymore— things have been great. Better, really. But that didn’t mean that slip-ups didn’t happen, Jeremy’s anxiety was still there, and that was okay.

Sometimes, he still got swallowed by his self-doubt, by that dangerous nigging _what if_, because really, there was so many of them. But Michael was always there, giving him subtle reassurances, telling him that it was okay to be scared sometimes, and reminding him that he just needed to live in the present.

Jeremy was grateful, so incredibly grateful, and Michael said that he didn’t have to be. That he deserved everything Michael gave him and more; and even if he didn’t think the same way, maybe he could learn to.

It’s hard, self-love, but Jeremy wanted to learn it, wanted to feel it.

“You’re thinking again,” Michael said, tenderly, hand in his, his lips planting a soft kiss to his white knuckles. “You okay?”

Jeremy chuckled, and ran his shaky fingers through his hair. “… Y-you know me too well, and actually, yeah, m’great.”
His eyes trailed down to Michael’s *Birthday Boy!* sash, it still made him laugh, the fact that Michael spent a hard-earned seven dollars on it, and Jeremy figured that Michael will probably get his money’s worth when he wears it again, next year.

Jeremy thought for a second, about whether or not they’ll be dating the same time next year, and seriously, he couldn’t help it, but this time, instead of worrying about their relationship and its stability, instead of being scared, he let himself be optimistic.

So Jeremy hoped. Hoping was still a new concept to him, he never like setting expectations or having goals just because of the prospect that it’d all come crumbling down.

But reality was already so hard to believe anyways. Nothing really felt like a far-fetched dream anymore.

He hoped that next year, that stupid sash will be in the photos, photos that will eventually end up in Jeremy’s scrapbook, maybe even the yearbook. He hoped that next year, he’ll see it at school, call Michael a nerd affectionately, muffle his sarcastic response with a kiss, and not care about being in public while he does it. He hoped that he’ll see in the dim, candle-lit background when he gives Michael another birthday cupcake.

*Wait, fuck*, he realized, then leapt up from the swing, sending it off-kilter. *I completely forgot.*

“I’ll be right back!” he yelled, as he leapt through the back door. He realized that maybe dashing out with little to no preamble was probably a little confusing, and judging by Michael’s distant “It’s only been like, four minutes! The cake isn’t ready!”, he was correct.

But Jeremy’s backpack was in the kitchen, and there, in it—in a small little plastic box, looking a lot like the one he kept Michael’s boutonnière in on homecoming night—was his cupcake. Not in the ‘Yellow’ flavour, sadly, because yellow wasn’t a fucking real flavour that any right-minded baker accepted, in mocha.

Yes. Michael was one of *those* people, who like barely-coffee flavoured things, but not actual coffee. To be fair, it tasted pretty damn good, plus it had caramel drizzle, which made it a somewhat respectable dessert.

So Jeremy stuck a candle in, scoured the kitchen drawers for a lighter, and was happy to see his surprise gift still lit by the time he got outside.

“I was gonna sing happy birthday, but um, no.” Jeremy said, taking tentative steps back onto the couch, shielding the flame from any wind with his hand. “You got enough of that at school today.”

But Michael was looking at him like Jeremy personally took the time to hang up the Sun every morning, like he was responsible for every shining star looking down on them right now.

“Michael?” Jeremy asked nervously, sitting down. “Buddy?”

“God damnit Jeremy.” Michael said, laughing a little, smiling too widely as he took the cupcake. “You’re fucking perfect.”

Jeremy’s heart skipped a beat, and he flushed, tucking a small strand of hair that’s been bugging him behind his ear. Like always, he didn’t really know how to respond to Michael’s flattery, so he muttered a “No, you,” and tried to keep his breathing steady.

Which was difficult, Jeremy found out. When you were dating Michael Mell, breathing itself became a foreign concept that he had to re-learn hundreds of times over, whenever they kissed,
whenever they talked, just being in a room together got him so giddy that he struggled to keep any cool.

Michael chuckled, shaking his head lightly before he blew against the wavering flame, snuffing it out with just a tendril of smoke to replace it. “Seriously, Jeremy, you’re the best.”

But Jeremy felt his own fire, kindling warmly in his chest. It’s not angry, like before, it’s not the scorching pyre that threatened to burn Jeremy alive, it’s not that charring, painful blaze that had lodged itself into his sternum, that tried to choke him.

This fire, this *glow*, was a reward just in itself. It’s a hearth, nestling deep in his ribcage, delicate and soft, happy and fluttery; complete.

It doesn’t *HURT* anymore.

So Jeremy sat there, impatiently, with his bouncing legs pushed together and his hands tucked in-between them for warmth, while he watched Michael eat, lips twitching.

His hand raised, just once, to dismiss Michael’s concern over whether or not he wanted some of the frosting (and he declined obviously, after he learned his lesson eating a quarter of a tub of it from earlier. A poor life decision), but otherwise, he was pretty quiet.

And of course, Michael noticed.

“What’s up?” he asked, scarfing down a bite of the dessert. His nose had a pretty big dollop of frosting on the tip, and maybe that should be gross, but it was actually kind of cute. It was also sort of Jeremy’s fault, since he forgot to grab a fork when he ran inside.

Jeremy flicked it off. “Waiting.”

“For?” Michael said, scrunching his nose. It didn’t take long for him to finish the cupcake, it was pretty small and Michael was pretty hungry, so if you put two and two together, you could understand how he wolfed it down in under three minutes flat.

“B-birthday kisses.” Jeremy blurted, tight-lipped and skittish, shifting restlessly. He hoped he wasn’t being too straightforward or anything, but “I know it’s your birthday, but still. I r-really, really want to kiss you right now.”

Michael seemed amused, the good kind of amused, a affectionate smile donning his lips. He pushed the plate off to the side— on the little coffee table— and tilted his head at Jeremy with curious eyes.

There’s that something else in Michael’s eyes again, in the soft, orange lighting from the fire. It’s that same loving, affectionate glean. Jeremy saw it a lot now, but still, every time he catches it, he falls head over heels.

“I love you.” Michael whispered, hovering over Jeremy’s face, too close, too tantalizingly close.

Jeremy coiled his arms around Michael’s neck, going to mush. He could feel the slight dangling sash, his hands running along the blue fabric.

“I love you too, my birthday boy.”

They both leaned in, crashing together with seismic relief. It’s only been a half-hour tops since they’ve last kissed mouth-to-mouth, but Jeremy wanted this. He always wanted this.
It took Jeremy a while to get ahold of kissing. It took him longer to figure out how to get ahold of his feelings, but with Michael, none of that really mattered anymore.

He could be desperate, he could be needy, and Michael wouldn’t— and definitely didn’t— care. He gave Jeremy all the attention he craved, all the attention he had to give, every last drop.

So Jeremy didn’t stifle the whimper that came with the satisfaction of contact. Finally, he thought, tangling their legs together, crawling closer, with his hands cupping Michael’s face for leverage.

His theory was proven correct: kissing Michael was one of his favourite things to do. Maybe his favourite thing to do, actually, because it sent him into a mindset where nothing else really mattered, where he could just give up on tomorrow as a concept, where it was just them, together, for real.

It’s like an alternate dimension, where surroundings were blurry, always out of focus, never important, where the only thing Jeremy could see was him, a solid chest against his own, with those clingy, restless hands travelling up and down his body, always on the run, never still.

It’s a dizzy, swaying world, made just for the two of them. Nothing else really mattered here, all his worries, all his qualms and problems just melted away into nothingness, and that’s saying a lot for a boy with anxiety. It’s a sweet, short silence in Jeremy’s thunderstorm of a life, where all he knew was that Michael was kissing him, and that he was kissing Michael.

Kissing Michael came easy to Jeremy. Maybe it was just the month long trial that they did under the guise of “platonic practice” that made it second-nature to Jeremy, but personally, he knew it went deeper than that.

It’s the way Jeremy got lost in the motions— so much that he just didn’t care about anything else— meant something more. Their kisses were fluid, a system, and the two of them worked in tandem like a well-oiled machine. That type of chemistry, that type of mutual understanding and intimate instinct telling Jeremy what to do and when to do it, had a name.

Jeremy knew what it was, and by the looks of it, Michael did too.

It’s soft at first, like most kisses were, with Michael carefully padding his lips against Jeremy’s, but it scaled rougher and rougher, and it was one, two, maybe three long kisses in before Michael’s hand pressed against Jeremy’s jaw to lock him in place, and their chests met.

It drove him crazy, gentle bite and swallowed moan, they made him absolutely nuts. Jeremy might never have enough of these kisses and he knew that, but God damnit if he’s not going to try.

They inevitably had to split for breath. Still, seeing Michael’s face, his swollen mouth, glistening eyes and slightly mussed hair, was a high of its own.

There’s a slight gap between his spit-slicked lips that Michael was truly entranced by. He ran his finger across the bottom half, feeling the bitten ridges and wet slather, humming contently.

Jeremy’s hands descended from the back of Michael’s neck down to his shoulders and shoved lightly, just forceful enough for Michael to get the hint, and together they fell back against the pillows.

That’s where Jeremy climbed on top of him— with Michael’s hands guiding the way to his lap— and those brief seconds spent in the interim, repositioning, where their lips weren’t attached, felt like hell.
His hands trapped themselves in Michael’s hair before he swept in, peppering him with a string of messy kisses. With each one, Jeremy tilted his head a different way, trying to find the best angle.

“I never thought I’d be here.” Jeremy breathed, pulling back, and it was true. How was he ever supposed to predict this? Catching feelings for Michael was already so left-field, but falling in love with him? Michael reciprocating? That was never apart of the plan.

But that plan failed, yet “failed” wasn’t exactly the word Jeremy would use to describe the current state of affairs. Here they were, sitting together on a swaying couch, pupils blown, hands clutching to one another like they were the only thing keeping them on the ground.

“Me neither.” Michael said, his voice soft and low, face red.

Jeremy just couldn’t stop smiling, hypnotized by the slight, rhythmical movement of the couch swinging back and forth beneath them, by the wavering heat the firepit casted against his back, by the something else deep in Michael’s eyes; and God, he loved seeing that something else.

Michael gripped Jeremy’s cardigan, pulling him forward and back onto his lap with a fervent need in his hungry eyes. It was surprising that they were even able to stay apart that long.

His teeth bit Jeremy’s lip, his sugary tongue licked down the sting, and his mouth tasted Jeremy’s own.

Michael’s appetite was maddening, the lust, the longing, the drive for more, it coaxed Jeremy into giving in, into limpness, into a subtle submission, into Michael.

He felt his body getting hotter and hotter as he sunk deeper, and deeper into it. It was a night in late November in New Jersey, and Jeremy was breaking a sweat.

It’s confirmed. Kissing Michael was definitely Jeremy’s favourite thing to do.

He felt Michael’s animalistic hands digging under the ridden up hem of his shirt, and reaching against his bare skin. His fingers were warm-blooded and tender, blindly mapping out Jeremy’s waist, his chest, his shoulders—

“Fuck, Micah.” he begged, sounding wrecked, and in the far corners of his mind, he simply prayed that Mr Mell didn’t have any secret surveillance cameras out here, but God, he didn’t even care anymore.

Thing is, Jeremy normally never liked feeling this vulnerable. He hated it, actually, but with Michael, that all changed. It was okay to be vulnerable here, because Michael was in the same boat.

“You’re amazing.” Michael said, his lips dotting quick lines down Jeremy’s chin onto his neck, kisses getting rougher by the second. “Honestly beautiful.”

A hand winded back out of his shirt— only for a brief moment— so it could peel back Jeremy’s neckline just enough for Michael to look an apt place to make a mark.

Of course, Michael looked eager— urged on by Jeremy’s high, ragged sounds and rocking hips— so it didn’t take long for him to find somewhere and dip onto his collarbone, sinking his teeth softly into Jeremy’s skin.

Then the oven beeped. That goddamn menace of an oven, who dared to interrupt them a second time.
“God damnit.” Jeremy hissed, voice barely above a breathy whisper. “Again?”

But fine, whatever. Jeremy didn’t spend a half hour putting up with Michael’s objectively dumb jokes about SuperMoist to burn the cake altogether.

Besides, while they wait for it to cool, they could continue with their little playtime. Kitchen counters were some of the best places to make-out in, anyways.

High-school theatre was pretty hit-or-miss depending on the school. Some schools had teachers who just supervised a production because of the high-demand, others had avid Broadway-loving teachers who put their blood, sweat, and tears into orchestrating something passable, even with a small budget.

Mr Reyes was one of those teachers, despite his questionable casting choices. Sure, he pushed Jeremy into doing a less-than-ideal role, but it’s been almost four months of rehearsals since.

And Michael, being the supportive best-friend-slash-boyfriend he was, was excited to see the outcome. Even if he used to think that high-school theatre was pointless and just made to placate a very niche group of students up until Jeremy signed up.

Yeah. Things were different now. He even got there early to give a little pre-show pep talk to Jeremy in the back, to tell him he’s gonna do great, and kiss his hand because they couldn’t risk ruining the makeup.

A half hour of stalling in the school lobby after that, he settled into a seat.

The house-lights went dim maybe fifteen minutes later, just when Michael was about to fall asleep in his chair. His mom elbowed him awake, and there, just ahead of them, a red-lipped Madeline Côté walked on stage, wearing a shoulder-padded, knee-length robin’s egg blue dress and white gloves.

Michael almost whistled when Jeremy walked out, but then he remembered etiquette and general human decency, plus the fact that he’d humiliate him, so he didn’t.

Two lengthy monologues, a very dramatic-albeit-tolerable farewell to Amelie’s husband, and forty minutes of theatrical instrumental and makeshift prop cameos in, the kiss happened.

Of course, Michael expected it to happen, how could he not? He’s ran over the lines countless (maybe four) times with Jeremy, and he knew the cues pretty well, so he had all the time in the world to prepare for it.

Still, even though it was the climax of act one, he couldn’t keep himself from rolling his eyes. He didn’t like the sight of anybody kissing his Jeremy, even if it was just for a performance.

Jeremy wasn’t lying when he said it was drawn out. It felt like minutes—even though he knew that wasn’t true—that Michael sat there, listening to tense violin music, watching them mash together their faces in the spotlight.

Michael’s stomach turned with a bite of jealousy. A tiny voice of anger that just told him to climb up there, kiss Jeremy’s brains out, and show Madeline who’s boss. But yeah, obviously, he
couldn’t, because that’s insane.

And yeah, he got to kiss him all the time, so it was whatever. He’ll let it slide, and hold out until the next time he saw Jeremy off-stage.

But, he couldn’t help but wonder if it was pleasant, kissing her, even if it’s for just for show. Then he remembered all the times after rehearsal where Jeremy complained that “She clearly doesn’t know what mints are ”, and he laughed instead.

Seconds later, the two tore apart, staring at each other distantly, before Amelie darted off the stage, and the instrumental cut. The footlights came on, too, which meant it was time for intermission.

Unfortunately in the small interim between acts, Michael couldn’t go see Jeremy. They locked the door to the backstage because of the crowd, boyfriend status or not, and besides, Jeremy’s probably wiped already, and had to do whatever they have to do back there to get ready for the second half.

And for a high-school play, it was great so far, both Michael’s mom and Nikita, her girlfriend, agreed with him on that. Sure, maybe Michael was just a little biased, but he personally thought Jeremy was the best one up there.

Maybe more than “a little” biased, but hey, what could he say? He’s proud of Jeremy, because he took the initiative to do something he wasn’t comfortable with, and he was nailing it.

Michael could only hope that Jeremy saw that too. Maybe he was in the dressing room panicking or maybe he was okay. He could get so caught up in his head sometimes, but God, people loved him up there, if the ovation was anything to go by.

Still, it was probably best Michael reminded him, even if Jeremy didn’t have his phone on hand.

“michael mellon; I love you so fucking much Today at 8:23”

“michael mellon; god your so talented jere Today at 8:23”

“michael mellon; ffjksfhdi you gonna get the absolute MOST post show kisses the world has evr seen Today at 8:24”

The second act blew by quicker than the first, even though it was actually longer.

Maybe that was because Michael found himself getting enveloped deeper and deeper into the story.

Look, he wasn’t really into theatre much, he only had a couple of songs from some modern Broadway shows on a very specific Spotify playlist, and since he had go-to bops from almost every genre, that wasn’t really saying much.

But even if he wasn’t the biggest fan, he could respect the dedication behind it, because it wasn’t like a TV show where they could do retakes and cuts and edit things out, it was live, where
everyone had to do everything they had to do perfectly on the first go. There were no second chances, no safety net, and frankly, Michael understood why Jeremy was so freaked out about it.

It’s just, it was amazing to see hard work paying off, and the months spent in auditions, read-throughs, and dress rehearsals.

The longer Michael watched, the farther he sat on the edge of his seat, the more immersed he got in the plot. The show was pretty misogynistic, but he figured that was the point. It’s an underdog story set in the forties, after all.

Sure, the others were great, and they, against all odds, didn’t completely half-assed the performance, but Michael was more impressed at how good Jeremy was at acting.

Seriously, wasn’t he supposed to have stage-fright? Wasn’t he terrible at lying? Maybe those headspaces he was talking about actually worked then, because it was like Jeremy was an entirely different person, and that was the goal here.

He didn’t really fit the bulky suit that his character was in, but to compensate, he squared his shoulders and stood tall. Michael hadn’t seen him slouch once, and he really was only looking at Jeremy for the entire play, so he’d know.

The makeup was good too, his rosacea and dark circles were concealed, and he looked tanner, compared to normal. Maybe some contour, too, because Michael couldn’t remember Jeremy having that strong a chin before.

Not the point, Michael reminded himself. The point was the team behind the theatre program at Middleborough obviously spent a lot of time pumping out something decent, and it paid off.

And no, if anybody asks, Michael did not (he repeats: did not ) cry at the end.

Okay, fine, he’ll admit it: he totally cried at the end, but whatever, he wasn’t the only one. So did his mom, and so did Nikita. How could they not? It was a forlorn tale about cheating, doomed love and financial distress in a time of oppression and war where no character really came out on top.

Because Michael was staying over at Jeremy’s tonight, he waited patiently in the school lobby with Mr Heere after the show.

Mr Heere. Someone, actually, maybe the last person, who did not know they were dating yet—and if you’re wondering why, it’s because Jeremy’s been worked up over how he’d break the news to him.

Sure it’s been almost three months, but there was no rush. Jeremy hasn’t even updated him on the latest developments with his sexuality, and dating a guy would probably give it away that he was bi.

They kind of have to get past the first stage before their big reveal. For the time being, Michael’s family and friends swore off telling him or cracking any conspicuous jokes.

No, Jeremy’s dad wasn’t a homophobe—or at least not an adamant enough one that he openly talked about it—but the Heeres already had a tense relationship, and Jeremy didn’t want to risk
losing his last bit of family. That was understandable. He’s tried to come out to him before, but always got too choked up.

Still, it did make for some strained silence while Mr Heere and Michael stood there together, waiting with all the other proud parents and huddled friend groups.

It was just that Michael knew something Mr Heere didn’t, and so, to evade any queasy smalltalk, he paced side to side with his earbuds in, and avoided any and all eye-contact.

He never pegged the man as the type of father who’d chase down his kid’s boyfriend with a shotgun, but you never know. Michael was not about to take that chance.

Gratefully, they didn’t have to wait long, because soon enough, the back doors swung open, and the awkward quiet stretched between them was overthrown by a contagious giddiness that buzzed down the hall.

The first one who popped out was Christine Canigula— she played Amelie’s best friend— and almost immediately, she was swallowed into a happy chit-chat with her parents, along with presumably, her sister.

Second was Ryan, with a couple of his tech-crew friends in tow. Michael didn’t know much about him, other than that he was a junior, that he probably had to redo a year because he was just so dumb, that he played Amelie’s husband, and that he was probably the worst actor out of the entire cast.

Then, Jeremy. He came out almost right after Côté, and holy fuck, Michael’s heart swelled so much it probably doubled in size.

It’s just that, he loved him, so much, and after a performance like that? Michael couldn’t wait to sweep him off his feet with celebratory cuddles and flatter him with all the kisses in the world, hell, hell, he didn’t want to wait.

Apparently, Jeremy didn’t either.

Maybe he didn’t expect Mr Heere to be there, or maybe Jeremy just didn’t see him, or maybe he was so overcome with ecstasy that in the moment he didn’t care or understand the consequences but—

The instant he saw him there, he darted forward, dropped his backpack, perched himself up on his toes, and kissed Michael. Hands pressed against his tan neck, smile split ear-to-ear, nose nuzzling against his.

But then the bottom of Michael’s stomach dropped out, and his blood turned to ice.

“Jeremy—“ he choked out, jerking his head back.

God, he wanted this too, so, so bad, he almost melted into it, he almost gave in. He’s waited so patiently for the last two hours, watching Jeremy’s “forbidden romance” with Madeline, Michael would love nothing more than to just wrap his arms around him and pepper him with kisses until the Sun came up— but they couldn’t. Not right now.

It was the first time he’s ever cut a kiss short, the first time he didn’t let himself fall into it, the first time he ever said no, but it was for a good reason, he needed to pull away, now.

But it didn’t even matter. The damage had already been done.
“What’s wrong?” Jeremy breathed, stepping back, with a dejected, tight-lipped frown.

It’s hard for Michael to watch Jeremy’s eyes fill up with panic usually, but the absolute dread that drowned out his baby blues as he realized Mr Heere’s staunch figure at his side, was just painful to see.

“Oh—” he stumbled, swallowing loudly, his arm sliding down Michael’s until he found his hand and squeezed it tight. “Fuck.”

It’s hard to tell if Jeremy wanted to say something else, his jaw was hung open, but it appeared that any attempts he’d made to produce sound had just died off in his throat. He looked like a deer in headlights, frozen in place.

Michael coughed, every cell in his being itching to run away, but instead, he stood ramrod straight, gritted his teeth, and sucked in very manual, shallow breaths. “Right.”

He couldn’t just leave Jeremy to explain what just happened on his own. It’d be disastrous, not to mention a total dick move on his part. That didn’t mean he wanted to be here, though.

“Well, hi, son.” said Mr Heere, teetering on his heels. He was trying— failing— to look up nonchalantly at the ceiling; probably wanting to pretend like he didn’t see anything.

But yeah, they were all well aware of what happened, just nobody wanted to talk about it. Except maybe Jeremy, who looked like he was on the brink of a panic attack if it wasn’t for Michael’s hand steadying him, tethering him to reality, giving him some solitary stability.

“Sorry, I just… don’t know what to say.”

“Me neither.” Jeremy sighed. Michael could feel the wayward looks from parents who didn’t want to get involved. He shared that sentiment, actually, he’d love to rewind just a couple of minutes and stand somewhere where Jeremy would’ve see his dad first, and where this entire interaction never had to happen.

“Guess we have something to talk about on the way home now.” Michael said, nervous, his stomach turning. Mr Heere nodded his head, looking sympathetic to his shell shocked son still gaping in place, like he’d just been shot.

“Um, yeah. We should—” Mr Heere started, nervously scanning down the near emptied out corridor. “— we should get going.”

Both of the boys sat in the back on the car ride home, leaving the passenger seat empty.

Michael was anxious, sure, but not nearly as anxious as Jeremy looked. He was pallid, too pallid, his cheeks almost sickly green, with his shaky hands locked within Michael’s and his downturned eyes greying out with woe.

He obviously didn’t know what to feel, and really, neither did Michael. Mr Heere’s obscure silence and terse way with words wasn’t inspiring confidence that this was going to go well.

“Um, alright,” Jeremy’s dad sighed. Michael knew he probably wasn’t trying to be vague, that he
probably was just trying to find the words to say and how to say them, but still, his son was panicking, at the very least he could reassure him that he’s not going to be kicked out.

Small, consoling smiles can only take someone so far.

The drive from Middleborough to the house wasn’t that long normally, Jeremy walked it on days that he couldn’t get a ride, but sadly the main road was closed, and they had to take backroads, extending the trip by maybe fifteen minutes because of traffic.

Michael grumbled to himself. Fucking construction. He did not want to be in this car any longer than he had to be, and clearly, Jeremy was already on the verge of just jumping out.

“So, you and Michael,” Mr Heere said, tentatively, like Michael wasn’t in the back, eyeing him down like a hawk. “… dating now?”

*Way to lay it on thick, Mr Heere.* Michael thought, as Jeremy shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and gripped his hand just a little tighter. *Like Jeremy isn’t breaking down right now?*

He wasn’t going to mention how bone-crushing his grasp really was. Jeremy needed something to ground him, and what’s a few broken bones for comfort?

If it wasn’t for their meddling seatbelts, Michael would throw his arms around Jeremy, coddle him in a warm embrace, whisper comfort into his ear, and try to get it through to him that they’d be okay, even if he didn’t feel completely sure of that himself.

“Yep.”

The air of tension in the car was almost intolerable, so much that it made Michael sick. He questioned if really Mr Heere was actually homophobic, if he’d actually kick Jeremy out over something like this, but he never gave off that impression until now.

He knew now, everything Jeremy was afraid of. Mr Heere might be a deadbeat dad sometimes, but he gave Jeremy everything he owned, he housed him, fed him, gave him money and electricity and gifts and an education.

Point is, he couldn’t just lose his dad, especially over something so trivial like his sexuality and his relationship choices. Sure, it was super unlikely, but if it really came down to it, he’d have to chose Mr Heere over Michael.

“Huh,” he said, too simply, too uncharastically calm, but he didn’t look angry, either, not even annoyed. “I didn’t even know you were gay.”

“Bi.” Jeremy corrected, answers curt and simple. Michael assumed it’s because he couldn’t choke out anything more, it happened a lot when he got anxious.

“I… don’t know what to say.” Like that wasn’t obvious enough. His dad looked disappointed, and Michael could tell through how small Jeremy was making himself, that he was taking it to heart. Michael didn’t know if Mr Heere didn’t notice the fear in his eyes, or if he was just choosing to ignore it. “Were you ever going to tell me?”

“I guess I-I’d have to, eventually.” Jeremy muttered, while Michael rubbed small circles into his white knuckles, trying to ease the tension.

Mr Heere looked at a lost, from what Michael could see through the rearview mirror. “Sorry.” he deadpanned, eyes cowering away from the two boys.
“For?”

“You could’ve told me, and you didn’t. Were you scared?” Mr Heere inquired, voice somber and solemn in a way that Michael’s never heard him speak before. “I just, I dunno. There must’ve been a reason you didn’t want to.”

Jeremy’s chest sunk in relief, like a weight was just lifted off his shoulders. He still looked uncomfortable, just a little less scared. “Sort of.”

Mr Heere mulled this over, humming with his closed eyes, and his hands laying loosely against the wheel. A red cone light streamed through the windshield and lit up his tapered features: his flat, tight-lipped smile, his tired dark circles and unkempt beard. “So who else knows?”

“Everyone under the Sun whose name isn’t Paul Heere.” Jeremy chortled. It still had that same nervous ring to it, but the joke gave the littlest bit of needed levity in the car ride of hell. “But uhm, yeah. The Mells know, and our friends do, too.”

“Dang, all of the Mells?”

Michael chuckled, pitching in for the first time since they left the school parking lot. Of course, it wasn’t really his conversation to have anyways, more of a conversation just to be here for, for moral support or whatever. “Yeah. Even Nikita.”

Mr Heere’s met Nikita a few times. She’s really only been in Michael’s life since late September when she started dating Ms Langit, but she was the first one in their house to find out after she cracked a joke about how cute they’d be together over dinner, followed by a nervous “About that,” from Jeremy.

“Then um, how long has this been going on?” Mr Heere said.

Jeremy scratched the back of his head. Another one of his anxious ticks, Michael noted. “Er, three months. Since like, November.”

His dad let out a long, laboured, sigh. It had a hint of a dry laugh somewhere in it, but honestly, it sounded pathetic, and only made Michael feel bad for the guy. Of course, he’s never been a father before, but he couldn’t imagine Jeremy keeping that big a secret hidden from him for so long. “Really? That long and I didn’t even notice?”

Jeremy looked to Michael, wayward and uncertain, biting his lip. It’s good to see the soft pink undertone back in Jeremy’s face, really comforting, actually, like as if he was worried for a second that he’d turned into the Wicked Witch of the West and that his skin colour would never change back to normal.

“Yeah. I guess obliviousness runs in your family.” Michael said.

Luckily. Mr Heere actually laughed at that, and Jeremy did too. “Fair.” they both muttered.

Michael was grateful for two things: the interrogation had become a little less tense— even if it was slightly more depressing— and they were almost home.

Jeremy probably wanted nothing more right now than to flop onto his bed and pass out after tonight, and on some level, Michael did too. Sure it was Friday, sure the night was young and he could play video-games, beat a high-score, maybe watch a little television too, but going to bed looked amazing right now.
“Oh, I completely forgot to tell you back there but um, you did great Jeremy.” said Mr Heere, but his voice was melancholy and broken. “Seriously kid, I didn’t know you could act like that. I’m proud.”

Jeremy’s small, restrained grin was like heaven to the eyes. Michael was a little whiplashed over his mood change, but hey, it changed for the better. Jeremy wasn’t shaking anymore, and that mattered more than anything else.

“Thanks, dad.” he peeped.

Michael made a mental note to talk about just how much he loved the show later, when they were alone and where he could show his praise in more… physical manners. It didn’t seem like the right time to shower him with compliments now, with a sad-and-possibly-angry Mr Heere basically looming over his shoulder, so he kept himself an arms length away from Jeremy, and he kept himself quiet.

But then, everyone else became quiet too, like monks with a vow of silence, and for the rest of the drive home, they all respected the vigil.

At some point, Michael and Jeremy evolved from wonky sign language and started communicating through iMessage, because while neither of them wanted to interrupt the cold stillness, they still needed to chat.

Mostly about whatever the fuck just happened.

“jeremy queere; welp guess our secrets out Today at 9:34”

“michael mellon; you ok? Today at 9:34”

“jeremy queere; yeah. You? Today at 9:34”

“michael mellon; im not the one to be worried abt Today at 9:34”

“michael mellon; but yeah im good Today at 9:34”

“michael mellon; want some dog vids Today at 9:34”

“jeremy queere; Is that even a question? Today at 9:35”
It took maybe another fifteen minutes of monastic silence, but the trio finally pulled into a suburb lit by street-lamps and house-lights, where just around the bend, was their home.

Michael’s been in the neighbourhood an unhealthy amount of times for someone who didn’t even live there— or at least someone who didn’t live there full-time—, so much so that he knew the numbers of almost every house by heart.

Jeremy’s was 1177, and as a kid, Michael used to remember it by humming a jingle, a jingle that Jeremy used to hate with a passion, because whenever Michael sung it, it got stuck in his head. Sometimes, Michael would catch him singing softly the words _eleven double seven_ absent-mindedly, and of course, like any friend would, he made fun of him for it.

1177, written on the same plaque hung above the garage doors.

And Jeremy’s never moved houses before, so it’s been there all his life, etched in the brick. On some level, seeing it was comforting, because it stamped the face of his home, the face of warm meals and naps after long days at school, the face of solitude, peace and quiet, and a safe haven to play video-games with his best friend.

It’d already been quiet enough in the car, but without the hum of its rumbling, near broken down engine, it turned unbearably still.

“Well, we’re here.” a red-nosed Michael mumbled to him, prodding Jeremy’s shoulder with his elbow

Their hands haven’t left each other’s since they got in, and even though it was clammy between their palms, it was soothing and secure, and right now, they both kind of needed that.

Sure, he wasn’t threatening them or anything, but they both were still unsure if Mr Heere’s opinion on them had changed at all because of what they were. In all honesty, it looked like he wasn’t sure, either.

Through a small glimpse in the rearview, Jeremy could see the raw expression in his dad’s face as he repented on the last half hour.

Vulnerable, really, if Jeremy had to pinpoint the feeling behind his glassy eyes, it was like he was teetering somewhere between recently divorced and just on the cusp of a mid-life crisis.

But to be fair, that phrase could he used to describe Mr Heere generally, not just in this very moment.

Still, Jeremy couldn’t help feeling a little bad for not telling him sooner. Of course, he’s been scared, and that was reasonable, but frankly, in retrospect, it didn’t seem like there was anything to be afraid of, other than making his dad look crushed, like he just found out that everything he’s ever known was a lie.

He worried if maybe his dad was okay, starting to wonder if he was even homophobic, or if he was just a sad parent dealing with the reality that their kid doesn’t trust them. Maybe both.

But Mr Heere barely showed interest in his life ever, hardly asked anything beyond “How was your day at school?” or “What do you want for dinner?”, and, after the divorce, gave up all of his responsibilities. Fatherhood for him was a forgotten prospect, like he’d dropped a hobby, and anytime they just tried to talk to each other, they fought.
Jeremy shouldn’t pity him— it was his fault that he never wanted to tell him anything anymore— so why did he?

The suffocating car was really starting to get to his head, Jeremy realized, so he swung open the door, and welcomed the cold air with open arms.

He was already shivering by the time he got outside. Cursed his thin skin.

But two slammed doors, an assuring beep beep! and a minute or so of key jamming later, he kicked off his boots and set aside his bag. In comparison to the absolutely freezing temperatures outside, the den was toasty and inviting.

Jeremy wished he could enjoy it more, but right now, the more important matter was the weird, uncomfortable stillness that stretched between he and his dad, then he could get around to basking in the familiarity of home.

But it’s like everytime he looked over at Mr Heere, Mr Heere was looking back, with fallen eyes. He didn’t know if he was supposed to say anything, or just respect his dad’s wishes by letting him grieve the death of his heterosexual son in silence.

“Alright.” his dad said, stiff in the shoulders, all composure or attempts at composure were completely lost. He looked Jeremy up and down, then glowered over at Michael, like he was the one who turned his son bi, that he was the one to be held accountable. Which, on some level, was true, just, that wasn’t really how it worked. “Michael, could you give us a minute?”

Michael hesitated, because of course he did. It's clear, by the look in his eyes screaming for help, that he didn’t want to leave, it’s clear that he’d rather be here, by Jeremy’s side than anywhere else right now, because at least then he’d know if Jeremy was okay or not.

He expected this question, he was still not sure what to respond with, though.

“Er— okay.”

But he complied, eventually. It took a couple of seconds, but he sucked in a breath, glanced over at Jeremy, said “You better tell me everything afterwards” sotto voce, and reluctantly climbed up the stairs, backpack in hand.

And that’s when Jeremy went from ‘bordering on anxiety attack’ to ‘full-fledged anxiety attack’, simply praying to a God he hasn’t prayed to since he was eleven that this wasn’t the end. Lead pooled in his stomach, and whatever was left of the colour in his face made a swift exit alongside Michael.

Because now— even though he was just a flight of stairs or a simple cry for help away— they were alone, and when was the last time something good happened from Jeremy and his dad being alone in a room together?

But then Mr Heere drew his lip into a tight line, tiptoed over, and swathed Jeremy in a hug. A hug. A really long, awkward, but fulfilling hug that only slightly crushed Jeremy’s ribcage.

Here's the thing, Jeremy and his dad rarely show any affection to each other anymore, and since hugs still fall under “displays of affection” category, that could really only translate into one thing:

Mr Heere did not hate him at the moment, and his shoulders— tense and hunched for the last hour or so— finally sagged in relief. It’d been eating at him for a while now, even if he knew it was irrational.
But the gesture still felt so weird, so foreign, and it shouldn’t be, right? He was Jeremy’s dad, his only parent as of last year, but still, letting his head rest on Mr Heere’s shoulder was just so unnatural and forced.

It really made Jeremy think about how little a bond they had anymore, and a little piece of his heart shattered in two, remembering his happy childhood and those fuzzy bittersweet memories at the ice cream parlour or the nights they spent binge-watching *Spongebob* episodes together.

“I’m happy for you, honestly.” his dad whispered, choking the words out. “I’m just. I’m sorry I’ve been such a… failure of a dad, lately.”

It’s the hopelessness in his voice that really hit Jeremy where it hurt. He couldn’t stop the tears that brigaded his waterline, that made his vision bleary, that threatened to pour down his cheeks at the sound of an apology he’s waited a year to hear. He tightened his arms around his dad, and scrambled for the ability to speak again.

“It’s okay I guess.” said Jeremy back, and if he was completely honest, he didn’t really mean it, but that’s not the point right now. They’ll work on it, hopefully, if this interaction even meant anything. “I haven’t really been the best son either.”

It then dawned on Jeremy that he couldn’t actually remember a time in his life where he was genuinely open with his dad, or, if there was, why he stopped. In all honesty he didn’t know who from or where he learned it— it being the innate defensiveness he had over sharing his feelings—but if he had to guess, it was maybe the fourth or third grade.

And then there was a point somewhere in his elementary school life where all of that just shut down, where he built up walls and defenses to push people away from seeing what he really was inside, where he limited conversations to loan requests and social cues. Maybe it was a gradual decline into silence, not just a sudden stop, but after that point, it was like trying to dig your way into a stone castle using a plastic spoon. Jeremy was the fortress, he never opened up about his emotions, and he liked keeping it that way, any attempts into his mind were thwarted by his arrogant nature.

*LAWS* and *BARRIERS* protected him from feeling. Or at least, from ever showing it.

“I’m the adult though, I’m your dad, the person who’s supposed to take care of you, and I barely act like it.” Mr Heere said, and Jeremy just murmured something inscrutable, not really to agree, but not really to deny, either.

They were still hugging, and for once, the duration of it wasn’t bothering him. It didn’t even cross his mind, how long they were just standing here, swaying awkwardly in the living room.

“You’re not doing this just to get back at me, right?” he asked, and Jeremy scoffed, because on some level, he expected this question. It always seemed to come up in LGBT short-films during the coming out scenes— not that he’s watched any— and always from the father, too.

“No way.”

“Good, good.” Mr Heere snickered, and his arms reeled back to either side of his stomach. “Are… you happy, with him? That’s all I care about.”

Jeremy nodded sheepishly, and his mind lingered back to Michael, everything he loved about him: his laugh, personality, grin, eyes, jokes, skin, flirty nature, body, compliments, hair—

God, he could go on all day. It’s just, there’s so much about Michael he liked, so much he could
So he found himself smiling, uncontrollably, ear-to-ear, riding some weird, post-emotional high. “Very happy.”

“Alrighty, well um. Good talk.” said Mr Heere, patting Jeremy’s back with a grin.

“Good talk.” Jeremy agreed, and normally, it’d be sarcastic. Normally. But today, today he changed. Today found himself almost crying because it all felt so real.

He quickly grabbed himself a water bottle off the side-shelf in their kitchen mini-fridge before turning to the stairs.

“Oh, and Jeremy?” he said, waiting Jeremy to stop and hum out an encouraging little noise before: “It’s okay to talk to me about these type of things.”

Jeremy twisted his head back to face his father, the tension in his abdomen giving out and unwinding. He wiped off his eyes dry with his sleeve, scared that if he didn’t, he honest-to-God might actually cry.

And sure, they were tearing down emotional barriers tonight, but crying was not ideal right now. “Yeah— um, thanks dad.”

Days were colder now of course. Winter came around and sadly, in the frigid February air, there was no more room for porchside makeout sessions or talkative walks around the neighbourhood. Kind of hard to do any of that stuff when Jeremy had to wear a high-collared duffel coat and mittens every time he went outside, and that’s not even mentioning Michael’s parka-and-scarf duo.

But hey, the weather had its benefits, too. The winter made for cozy night-ins and TV-marathons-slash-cuddle-sessions by the fireplace, and up until they headed upstairs for bed, Michael and Jeremy did just that.

Mr Heere retired early that night, assumably because having emotions was absolutely exhausting — Jeremy agreed, he felt really sleepy after earlier— but he left only after again, saying he was proud of Jeremy. 

It warmed his heart, really, to see his father change, and actually talk to him. It was hard to believe that Mr Heere was actually capable of change, something Jeremy gave up on months ago, but apparently, change happened everywhere.

“What’re you smiling at?” asked Michael, his hands toying with Jeremy’s thatch.

“You.” he said, and it wasn’t a lie. They changed too, maybe more than anything else in Jeremy’s life did.

Because the thing is, Jeremy never wanted to like Michael, but he really did, and he used to hate that he did. It’s funny actually, and a little sad, how much Jeremy used to try and stop his feelings
for him, how he made rules and wrote in a journal and kept at least an arms distance away from Michael at all times just so eventually, the love would die out.

Though, there’s always been a small side of him that loved it though, loved the thrill and the highs and even the lows, too, because Michael made Jeremy feel things he’s never felt before, and that, that just made him fall harder.

(God. He never stood a chance. It was a rigged system, and he was doomed to fail from the minute he walked into class on the first day of sophomore year.

Hell, if this was what failure felt like though, then Jeremy didn’t mind failing at all.

But it’s nothing like living in the present. He’s allowed now, to look at Michael, to shower him with compliments, taste him, and kiss his brains out. It’s such a free feeling that Jeremy never knew he needed.

“You’re adorable.” Michael hummed, planting a light kiss against his forehead.

Jeremy scoffed, flustered and giggling. “I’m the adorable one? Look at you, you're an adorable power move.”

Michael was breathless, maybe even perfect, or at the very least, the closest someone could get to it. Yeah, he was fussy about those “fake vintage junkies” and had a weird obsession with collecting stale discontinued sodas, but he was Michael Mell, his Michael Mell. Jeremy’s best friend for eleven years and boyfriend for three months.

So yeah, that basically meant that Michael was the epitome of adorableness, and God, the idea that he felt the same way about Jeremy was so hard to believe, but he trusted Michael more than anyone. It’s always been like that.

Jeremy smiled, and his heart fluttered, pumping at a rate way too fast for an activity like lounging, and the single intelligible thing crossed his hyperactive mind was:

_Kiss. Now._

So obviously, that’s exactly what he did. Because he could do that. Because it was honest, real, and true, and it felt _good._

A light, fleeting peck that ended as quick as it started, but Michael grabbed the back of Jeremy’s head, and softly tugged him closer.

With the angle, their positions, and the too small couch they were laying on, movement was limited to awkward writhing and restless squirming and uncomfortable wiggling just to reposition, but that didn’t really last too long.

Something in Jeremy just got fed up, and like an uncorked champagne bottle, he suddenly swung his leg into the air, and toppled himself over onto Michael’s stomach, making sure to lean down, and keep close in proximity to pepper soft kisses against his jaw.

“Holy shit,” Michael whispered, watering mouth gaped open, his sly fingers sliding delicately down Jeremy’s waist, trailing to his hip, and then to his thighs. His touch was searing hot, but still cold enough to make Jeremy shiver. Or maybe well, maybe it wasn’t because of the cold. “you’re — damn.”

Jeremy’s first hand pressed down on Michael’s chest, while he other covered his pouting mouth,
giggling shyly.

“Let’s um, let’s take this upstairs.” Michael breathed— licking his lips— and now *that*, that was an invitation that Jeremy just *couldn’t* refuse.

Late that same night, Jeremy and Michael laid in bed with intertwined limbs, and tired eyes, and blurry heads, and *The Breakfast Club* playing distantly at the foot of the pleated bed.

“Why did I pick this movie again?” Michael asked, his voice quiet and slurred. It had to be somewhere around one in the morning, but Michael actually had school to go to earlier, while Jeremy spent all afternoon doing pep-talks and stage-prep for the show. “Iss fuckin’ lame.”

“I dunno.” Jeremy murmured back, his thoughts still somewhat legible thanks to those three MVP extra hours of sleep. “You didn’t want to waste a good movie when you’re half-asleep?”

Michael’s head sloped against his shoulders, and Jeremy felt two strong hands wrapping underneath his armpits and around his midriff. “S’ttrash. I’m passing out now, love you,” he singsonged, kissing Jeremy’s shoulder lazily.

“Love you too,” Jeremy whispered. “good night.”

Michael let out a muffled, throaty hum that sort of passed off as a “G’nighty.” before his skull rolled limply against Jeremy’s back.

*Tonight was crazy,* Jeremy thought hazily over the fuzzy hum of some dumb 80’s comedy, because really, it had been. Between the pride and happiness that came after performing something he’d worked so hard on and the earth-shattering regret that swallowed him after kissing Michael in the school lobby, tonight had been a back and forth rollercoaster of emotions.

But like most days, he ended up safe and in bed, secure, cuddled in Michael’s arms.

Things were okay here, they were okay to think about, okay to talk about; hell, before he fell asleep, Michael and Jeremy spent maybe an hour just trying to mull over what happened with his dad tonight, and then another half hour of Michael just praising Jeremy for his acting.

*It’ll be okay,* like Michael always told him, even when they were kids, but now, now Jeremy actually believed it.

Because somehow, everything just turned out okay in the end. He had proof of that now,

Chapter End Notes

and that's the end! that is sophomore year, completed and done. i hope you all enjoyed reading this as much as i did writing it! four months later and we're finally done with chapter eighteen. seriously, thank you guys for relentless support and feedback on this fic!
again, i hope you enjoyed reading this fic!!

my friend faith drew a picture of michael in his sash, you can find that here

End Notes

comments, feedback, and support is always appreciated! i hope you enjoy this fic.

edit: 2020/01/01
if you're reading this now, i've orphanned the work and removed mention of my username. i don't really wanna be associated with it anymore, but i dont wanna remove it off the platform bc i know theres people who still like it

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!