"Jeremy stares down at his bag as he listens to the butchered rhythms tumbling out of the speakers. His classmates are eerily silent for the first few bars, until Michael breaks their trance with a reverent, “It doesn’t matter if that kid is straight or gay. He really can’t swing either way.”"

... 

Jeremy loves jazz, but really, really, really can’t play it. After a disastrous recital, he swears off jazz forever and gives up his dreams of performing to major in music education... until a fateful scheduling issue forces him into a jazz and improv class. There he meets Michael Mell, an insufferably cool bassist who doesn't know how talented he really is. Together, they have the potential to create something incredible. That is, if they can get along for even half a second.
“What do you mean by ‘not on track for graduation’?”

Jeremy tugs at a loose string on the hem of his cardigan. He’s leveling a watery glare at the “Leanna Lewis, Ph.D, Academic Advisor” placard balanced precariously on a pile of audition tapes from prospective freshman music majors.

Leanna Lewis, Ph.D, fixes Jeremy with a plasticated grin. “It means you don’t have enough credits to complete your major program on time. You’re short three credit hours, honey.”

“I thought music majors had a minimum of 45…?”

“They do. Elementary music education requires 48, dear.”

“Oh.”

“Let’s see what we can fit you into this semester, okay, hon?”

Jeremy nods and falls back into his chair while his advisor taps away at her keyboard with her neon pink claws. In the uncomfortable silence that follows, he becomes hyper aware of how loud he’s sniffling. He tries to surreptitiously wipe his nose on the sleeve of his jacket, but he must do a bad job because Leanna slides a pack of tissues across the desk at him without looking up from her computer. A few more minutes stretch by, filled with Jeremy’s increasingly anxious fidgeting, before Leanna leans back in her seat and says, “Okay. Good news and bad news for you, Jerry.”

“Uh, my name is Jerem-”

“Right, sorry, Jerell. Anyway, the good news: we have five upper-level music courses that are still enrolling.”

“Oh. That’s great, right? I can still graduate on time?” A tentative wave of relief washes up the length of his spine.

“Maybe. The bad news is the only class you haven’t taken yet is ‘Jazz and Improvisation.’ Now we both know you don’t have the most, eh…promising history with jazz, but…” Leanna shrugs apologetically.

Jeremy’s hit by a barrage of jazz-related memories he’s been repressing since his freshman year and slams his head on the desk in front of him. He grits out, “Are you sure there’s no other open classes?” before he’s struggling to choke back a fresh round of panic-induced tears.

Leanna leans forward and places a reassuring hand on Jeremy’s shoulder. “Honey, you’re a fantastic pianist. I’ve heard you play. You have nothing to worry about.”

“You’ve heard me play classically. I haven’t so much as touched a jazz chart since you-know-when.” Jeremy slams his head against the desk again.

“No one is going to remember your freshman year recital, I promise.”

“Are you kidding me?” Jeremy looks up from the desk. “It went viral. It was a meme, for God’s
sake. I had to change my major. I swore off jazz forever and I’m not about to start playing again now!”

Leanna sighs tiredly. “Well, if you want my honest opinion, you just haven’t given yourself enough of a chance. No one’s going to master jazz on their first try. And I thought your performance was...unique.”

Jeremy fails to contain a teary wince. “If by ‘unique,’ you mean ‘I’ve heard metronomes with more expression and musicality than the piece Jeremy butchered onstage in front of the entire college, and also the entire World Wide Web,’ then I would have to agree with you. I love jazz, but we both know I just can’t play it. Please, just...find me a different class?” Jeremy snuffles into a fresh tissue for a moment before he glances back up at his advisor.

The Cheshire cat-esque smile Leanna has been sporting for the duration of the meeting doesn’t crack, but her eyes attain a sort of manic glint that has Jeremy backtracking desperately before he’s fully aware of what he’s saying: “... b-but I’m sure I can work out how to play better! And I know it will come in handy when I’m teaching kindergarteners and they want to learn… uh, improvisational jazz…?”

As Jeremy pauses to consider the terrifying logistics of toddlers + jazz = ???, Leanna shoves his new schedule into his hands and ushers him out of her office with a predatory grin and a quick “Everything’s gonna be alright, Joseph, just do your best.”

The door slams behind him.

By the time Jeremy washes his face twice and convinces himself he looks less like he just spent the last hour crying over a scheduling issue and more like he’s just irresponsibly high, he’s already twenty minutes late for his 10 AM music theory class. He considers running across campus, but he hasn’t really exercised in earnest since high school (a sad, one week love affair with P90X in an attempt to lose five pounds of baby fat and the nickname ‘noodle arms), and he knows he’s more likely to pass out in the late August heat than actually get to class faster. He decides he’ll just skip his first class; after all, it’s already half over and syllabus day couldn’t be all that important.

As he’s wandering out of the student resource building, he takes stock of his feelings and is a little surprised to find that his initial ice-cold terror is slowly melting into excitement. He’d been waiting for a chance to redeem himself in the eyes of the musical community, and had been handed a fantastic opportunity on a silver platter. It was almost too good to be true. Sure, music critics had called his viral performance “the worst jazz piano of this century,” “painfully bad,” and “the experience of a clarinet screech, but extended over a full half hour,” but that was all three years ago.

He’s had time to improve as a musician since then and, although he hasn’t actually tried to play jazz, he’s feeling optimistic that he may have magically developed the emotion and sense of swing his performances have always been painfully lacking in. He’s not looking to go back to being a performance major, he’s accepted that he’ll never be able to play jazz that well, but it would be nice to prove he has some talent. It’d be nice to show the world he isn’t the same Jeremy Heere who managed to make it through fifteen years of musical training before realizing he was possibly the worst jazz pianist on the face of the planet. He nods to himself, smiling slightly, and realizes he’s made his way to the campus green.

Partially in an effort to keep his mood positive and in honor of his decision to give jazz another shot, he pops his earbuds in and hits shuffle on an old playlist labeled ‘Upbeat Jazz for Upbeat Jeremy :) For Good Days ONLY!!’ Almost immediately, he’s assaulted by a plucky, driving bassline that has him dancing on the sidewalk before he realizes what he’s doing. It starts in his hands; he’s tapping
the quarter note pulse and then the eighths, and then he’s bopping his head and all of a sudden he’s walking to the beat which puts him at a sort of awkward half-jog which he’s sure must look totally ridiculous, but then a piano kicks in above the bass and he’s absolutely lost to the music. He grooves down the street, shimmying his shoulders and highstepping, adding a few kicks here and there whenever he’s really feeling a phrase. As he approaches his dorm (and he is fully aware of how it is that he is a senior living on campus, thank you, no need to point it out), snapping his fingers and wiggling his thin hips, he’s feeling surprisingly confident. He’s riding high on life and nothing’s gonna bring him down. He’s gonna show up for his jazz class on time and confident if it kills him.

Jeremy’s running late and so out-of sorts anxious he almost misses his classroom; he manages to fight his way through the crowd of students to the enthusiastically labeled “Studio Six!!!” door. He stumbles through and makes his way to the back of the room, which is already filled with chattering students. Some are standing up, others are sitting in rows of chairs. Soundproof foam tiles line the walls and ceiling of the studio, and harsh, white fluorescent bulbs buzz overhead. Jeremy spots a few trumpet cases and some trombones, but no one seems to have their instruments out yet. A covered upright piano is pushed into a corner to the left of him. To his right sits a drum set packed away neatly in round black cases. The covered instruments send a glaringly obvious message that they won’t be actually working on music any time today. Jeremy breathes a gentle sigh of relief; he’s excited to get back into the swing of things (hah, swing), but he’s not sure he’s ready to dive right in.

“Hello everybody, welcome to Jazz and Improvisation!”

Jeremy’s attention snaps towards the front of the room, where a wiry man with frizzy salt-and-pepper hair is standing on a chair, gesturing wildly with a conductor’s baton in one hand and a stack of papers in the other. As the students’ chatter dies off, he jumps off the chair and begins distributing papers in a semi-orderly fashion. “They tell me syllabus day is for syllabi, and I’ve got to hand them out to every class. I don’t really see the use of it, especially for a high level music class like the one we’ve got here, but the last time I didn’t hand them out administration sent me a very nasty email. ‘Professor Reyes, the children need a syllabus. How will they learn without one? Please, Professor Reyes, think of the children.’ Well, I’ve thought of you this year, clearly. Take one, pass it back, come on everyone, you all need one.”

A tall man standing in front of Jeremy shouts back at the professor, “What if I can’t read? Do I still need to take one?”

Reyes fires back without missing a beat, “Michael Mell, if you read English anything like how you read music, you shouldn’t have passed the first grade.”

The class ‘oohs’ appreciatively, though Michael doesn’t seem upset from what Jeremy can tell from the back of his head. Michael has dark, wavy hair that curls gently at the nape of his neck where a big pair of vintage headphones rest. His broad shoulders fall in an easy slope beneath his red jacket, one hand resting on his hip, the other hooked lazily in the handle of a long, rectangular case. The case is covered in peeling stickers, but Jeremy’s too far away to make out any meaningful details. A short blonde kid hands Jeremy a crumpled copy of the syllabus, but he keeps his eyes on Michael. He seems comfortable with Reyes, trading insults with the professor like they’re old friends. He’s the epitome of cool.

If Jeremy’s being honest, he’s a little jealous of the confident, lazy superiority Michael seems to exude. And if he’s being a lot honest, Michael is pissing him off big-time. No one should have the ability to be as unrelentingly chill as Michael is being right now. In Jeremy’s opinion, people like Michael don’t even have to be mean to be shitty people. They just have to exist to make people like
Jeremy feel like trash.

As though he can hear Jeremy’s thoughts, Michael whips around and flashes him a shit-eating, gigawatt grin. They make eye contact and Jeremy almost drops his papers because, fuck, Michael is gorgeous. Jeremy faintly recalls that it’s probably against the laws of thermodynamics to be both hot and cool at the same time, but Michael seems to be making it work just fine. He flicks his gaze back to his syllabus, annoyance settling into genuine dislike low and hot in his chest. There’s another feeling there too, something sharper and redder that he doesn’t quite recognize, but he shoves it to the back of his mind and focuses on skimming through the packet of papers he has in his lap.

Reyes hasn’t done an amazing job at clearly outlining what the class will be about, but he’s able to pick out the important information; namely, he won’t have to actually play anything for a few weeks while the class focuses on jazz theory and history. He flips through a few more pages, realizes that he’s already mastered all of the required scales for the year and relaxes into his chair. Intimidating classmates aside, he’s feeling pretty confident about the coming year.

Reyes, who has finished passing out papers, makes his way to the front of the classroom. He hops back onto his chair and calls out, “Alright! We’ve only got a little time left today, so we’ll do introductions and icebreakers tomorrow. For now, let’s waste some time on Youtube.”

Jeremy glances back down at his syllabus, which reads ‘Day One: Study Classical Jazz Performances Online.’ Nice.

A projector screen Jeremy hadn’t noticed previously is pulled down from the ceiling and the lights in the room are flipped off. As Reyes boots up an old laptop, Jeremy takes another look around the studio. In the absence of the harsh florescent lighting, the room has taken on a much warmer, gentler appearance. The late afternoon sunlight filters softly through the windows, washing the students in a honey-golden glow. Reyes, oblivious to the groans of his students, clicks on Internet Explorer and pulls up Youtube. He starts to type in ‘Classical Big Bands’ but is interrupted by Michael, who shouts “Hey, Reyes! Hit me with that train solo!”

The rest of the students in the class immediately start to protest. Michael pretends not to notice as he stands up from his chair and begins to chant “Train solo! Train solo! Train! Solo!”

Reyes pauses for a moment before a look of understanding springs onto his face. “Pastorius? Again?”

“You know it, baby!”

Reyes shakes his head, grins, and types in “Barbary Coast.”

Michael lets out a whoop of triumph as a loud, jarring train horn blares through the speakers at the front of the class. He turns around and grabs another kid out of his seat, pulling him into a haphazard waltz stance. “C’mon, Rich, let’s dance.”

Rich, who Jeremy recognizes as the short blonde from earlier, laughs and twists out of Michael’s grasp. “Maybe later, pal. I think I’ll let you take the spotlight for now.” Michael seems briefly hurt, but masks it well and turns to the rest of the class. He’s bopping his shoulders to the music, a heavy, exposed bass line punctuated with staccato brass hits.

“C’mon y’all.” He belts a line from a Whitney Houston song in a warm, clear baritone voice: “I wanna dance with somebody!” When nobody volunteers, he turns around and looks at Jeremy.

“How about you, dude?”
Jeremy, who has been watching Michael with a mix of horror and awe, aggressively shakes his head. He’s appalled. If Jeremy, or anyone else for that matter, had interrupted a teacher, tried to start a dance party, and been rejected in front of the whole class, they would’ve been laughed out of the room. Michael, however, doesn’t seem bothered in the slightest, letting any judgement from the class roll right off his wide shoulders. He’s so confident in himself that everything he does, no matter how embarrassing it should be, seems effortlessly cool. It makes Jeremy sick.

Michael must pick up some latent hostility in Jeremy’s expression, because he quickly backs off. He raises his arms placatingly and laughs, “Whatever, dude, it was just a joke. Be more chill.” The class laughs as Michael shoots Jeremy a pair of finger guns and swings back into his chair with a muttered “Parkour, dudes.”

Jeremy’s face heats up with anger and embarrassment, but the other students are too focused on Michael to notice.

Reyes, likely sensing Jeremy’s rising anger, attempts to break the tension. “Now that we have been blessed by both the funktastic stylings of Jaco Pastorius and Mr. Mell’s angelic voice, let’s take a look at what we should try to avoid in performance, hm?” He pulls up a “Jazz FAILS!!” compilation on Youtube and hits play as the students settle back into their chairs.

This is something Jeremy can get into. He’s such a fundamentally awkward person that he finds it relaxing to remember that he isn’t the only screw-up in the world. He’s always so worried about himself that he forgets other people make mistakes, too. Onscreen, some poor schmuck vomits into a tuba and then falls over, closely followed by another clip, this time of a contrabassist dropping his instrument offstage. Michael whistles a low note and whispers, “That’s why you always go electric.” Jeremy tunes him out and focuses on the steady stream of misfortune playing out in front of the class. A drummer sticks his foot through a snare drum, a trombonist knocks a sax player out with his slide, a guitarist starts an amp on fire. Jeremy’s not exactly feeling better, but his mood is recovering bit by bit. He’s finally cooling off from his encounter with Michael when the ‘Jazz FAILS!!’ compilation goes suddenly quiet and Jeremy’s blood freezes. To anyone else, it wouldn’t be immediately clear what the ‘fail’ is, but Jeremy recognizes the video clip instantly. He slides as low in his chair as he can go, but can’t bring himself to tear his eyes away from the projector. Onscreen, a painfully thin boy in an ill-fitting suit is speaking into a microphone, “--jazz performance major and I’ll be playing C Jam Blues for you today! Thank you!” The video zooms in as he walks from the microphone to a gleaming grand piano in the center of the stage. Just before he reaches the bench, his foot gets caught in an extension cord and he falls face first onto the keys with a discordant crash. The audience stifles their laughter as the boy stands back up and sheepishly takes his seat at the keys. He lifts his hands to play, and it almost seems as though the video is going to cut off and spare Jeremy any further humiliation, but instead the camera just zooms in closer as the boy begins his solo.

Jeremy stares down at his bag as he listens to the butchered rhythms tumbling out of the speakers. His classmates are eerily silent for the first few bars, until Michael breaks their trance with a reverent, “It doesn’t matter if that kid is straight or gay. He really can’t swing either way.”

His classmates burst into raucous laughter at the same moment the audience in the video does.

Jeremy feels his heart shatter. An errant tear slips down his face as he quickly shoves his syllabus back into his open bookbag. He zips the bag closed with more force than he means to, and catches his thumb in the track. He breathes out a quick, emphatic “Fuck!” before he sits up, bag in hand, and realizes Michael is staring at him. He lashes out, angrily muttering “What are you looking at?” before he notices that Michael’s signature smirk is missing. Instead, he’s looking at Jeremy with a mix of recognition, understanding, and pity.
Jeremy’s rage burns white hot and he stands up abruptly, knocking his chair over backwards. Luckily, the rest of the class is too busy laughing at the musical massacre taking place on the projector to notice. He takes advantage of this and flips Michael off, spitting a vicious “I don’t need your pity,” as he storms towards the door. He takes a last glance back at the room as he heads into the hallway, tears starting to fall in earnest. Michael is frozen in place, expression unreadable. Onscreen, a slightly younger Jeremy Heere bows his head in front of a grand piano and cries.

Chapter End Notes

hey y'all! here's my first chapter
let me know if you like it!! i live for feedback. hit me with that Criticism!!!
if u want to talk about this chapter, share ideas, hit me with writing prompts, etc come say hi;; im coloredpencilroses on tumblr :^]
Jeremy unlocks his dorm room, keys jingling slightly in his shaky hands. He tosses his backpack aside with a heavy thump and pockets his keys, thanking the College Housing Gods that his assigned roommate had dropped out over the summer. The door swings shut behind him with a gentle click.

The late afternoon stillness of his cramped apartment-style room soothes his frayed nerves a little, and he takes a moment for himself to relax back against the side of the hall. Now that he’s alone and everything’s quiet, he realizes how drained he is. Jeremy lets his legs buckle and slides down the wall, landing heavily with his elbows on his knees. He takes a few deep breaths and cards his hands through his hair before a thought crystallizes in his mind: I really should have seen that coming.

Sure, he was terrified and excited and feeling kind of sick to his stomach from all the adrenaline spiking through his veins, but he should have caught wind of the potential for disaster the moment Professor Reyes mentioned bad performances. Jeremy’s like a meerkat: even the slightest sign of danger sends him scurrying to safety. But something this time around threw him off. He can’t really blame it on anxiety because he’s anxious about ninety percent of the time and it’s only improved his awareness up til now. He isn’t totally blind, either; he had seen what Reyes was looking up and had plenty of time to make the connection between bad performances + jazz = Jeremy, but it had somehow totally evaded him. He’s drawing a total blank until he finds himself humming Barbary Coast. The final piece falls into place and he realizes the only thing he can really blame his distraction on is Michael.

And who can blame him? Michael, he reasons, is infuriating. He’s loud and obnoxious and interrupts class and when he dances he sways his hips with a careless confidence that still has Jeremy a little more than distracted an hour later-- and he really shouldn’t be thinking about the hips of the guy who just aided in his public humiliation, christ, Jeremy, what the fuck?

He smacks the back of his head against the wall in frustration, then hooks his foot around his discarded backpack and drags it over to his side. He fishes through it for a moment before locating his laptop. He slides back up the wall and staggers over to his bed, which is really two twin beds pushed together (perks of having an absentee roommate). Jeremy falls face first onto the mattress, toeing his shoes off and pulling his laptop open all in a single, practiced motion. On a normal day, he’d already be browsing the internet for something to help him relieve a little tension, but today he’s too exhausted and disheartened to bother. Instead, he pulls up his email and types out a quick message:

TO: LEANNAKLEWIS@MBUADMISSIONS.ORG

SUBJECT: Class Schedule??

Hey, Leanna! This is Jeremy!! You registered me for Jazz and Improv because I was short a class. Unfortunately, I’ve decided that dropping the credit and graduating late would probably be the best choice for my academic career. Thanks for your understanding,
Jeremy rereads the message to make sure he hasn’t made any glaring typos, then forces himself to pause and really think his decision through. Even though his gut instinct is to drop the class and run as far away from jazz as possible, if he drops the class, he’s stuck paying room and board for an extra year. He’s starting to really doubt himself when his brain helpfully replays Michael saying “that kid can’t swing either way,” and his face is burning red hot with embarrassment all over again, so he determinedly scrolls over to the bright blue “SEND?” button and prepares to propel his message into the bottomless void of Leanna’s inbox.

But then he’s thinking about Michael’s broad shoulders and lazy, infuriating smile, and how he looked at Jeremy like maybe he didn’t mean to hurt him. A thrill of something electric drags up his spine.

Without really knowing why, Jeremy flicks his mouse a little to left and hits “SAVE AS DRAFT.” Just in case.

Jeremy’s roughly pulled awake by his alarm clock blaring “In the Mood.” He sits up and rotates a cramp out of his shoulder, groggily reaching for the alarm’s off switch. As he does, his gaze locks on the full-length mirror he’s leaned against the wall opposite his bed. He catches sight of his reflection and breathes out an audible “yikes.”

Between the harsh morning light and his sleep-matted hair, he looks like a reanimated corpse. His deathly pale skin and hollow cheeks don’t help matters much, either. He quickly looks away from the mirror and swings his legs over the edge of the bed, bare except for a pair of boxers and mismatched socks. Blue skinny jeans are hanging off the lamp beside his bed; after a quick sniff test, he determines they’re clean and pulls them on without bothering to undo the button.

At least, they used to be skinny jeans. He can feel the material shifting loosely around his hips and waist, and takes another glance at his reflection. His jeans-- ones he now recognize as being from his freshman year-- are dangerously close to slipping off his waist altogether, and he’s suddenly uncomfortably aware of how thin he is. Other people get the freshman 15, and Jeremy gets the senior -15. Great. He traces a spindly hand across the sharp corners of his ribcage and decides he should start eating better. Or at least remembering to eat, full stop.

After a few more seconds of staring at his reflection (Like looking at a car accident, Jeremy thinks, so bad you can’t look away), he decides that any major dietary changes should be made after his ten AM music theory class. It’s already coming up on 9:30 and he wants to be there early to make up for missing syllabus day, so he tosses on a baggy t-shirt and a baggier cardigan and starts to head out the door. It only takes him a few steps to realize he isn’t going to make it ten feet outside his dorm with his jeans in their current state, so he doubles back and quickly pulls on a belt, cinching it as tight as it can go around his waist. He wiggles around a little to make sure nothing’s going to fall down and, in the absence of any major wardrobe malfunctions, swings out of his room, not bothering to shower or comb through his unruly hair. He doesn’t have anyone he’s looking to impress, after all.
Jeremy rolls up to Music Theory twenty minutes early, and finds himself in a totally empty classroom. He can never seem to get his timing right. Shrugging off his backpack, he sits in a desk near the back of class and pops his headphones in. At least being early means he gets to listen to music in peace. He’s midway through a Grant Green tune when the first students start to trickle in; a few he vaguely recognizes, most he doesn’t. A girl to his left mentions something about a “totally crazy party on Saturday, I mean wild, man, absolutely,” but he tunes her out. He feels walled off, like there’s a thick sheet of glass between him and the rest of the class. He thinks this should bother him more, but for now, he’s content to vibe to the melancholy jazz washing over him as the classroom fills up and students start to take their seats. A cursory glance at his watch reveals that it’s 9:59 and Jeremy’s thinking that everyone who’s going to show up is already there, when the door to the classroom opens one last time and a familiar figure shuffles into the room.

It’s Michael, and Jeremy should probably be angry or surprised or upset or something, but he can’t summon up any real reaction besides a detached curiosity. For one, he’s sure the universe is actively conspiring to make his life hell at every possible opportunity, so the sudden appearance of the asshole from his Improv class doesn’t throw him off. And two? Michael looks rough. The blinding smile Jeremy grew to despise in the span of a single 50 minute class period is notably missing, and Michael’s got thick, square glasses balanced on his nose, ones he wasn’t wearing yesterday. Against his better judgement, Jeremy allows his gaze to slip a little lower, and realizes that Michael’s wearing sweatpants and flip-flops. College couture.

Seeing the campus’s resident cool guy looking like he just rolled out of bed with a killer hangover means Jeremy suddenly doesn’t feel as self conscious about his own greasy hair and oversized clothes. Jeremy watches as Michael tosses his bag under the desk closest to the door and slides into his seat. The professor takes her place behind a desk at the front of the room and starts to say something about a required scale exam, but Jeremy’s not listening. He’s too busy focusing on Michael. At first, he was a little smug to see the other man so clearly off his game, but now he’s feeling an chilly tinge of worry. After all, something has to be seriously wrong to screw with someone so seriously cool.

He hones in on the back of Michael’s head, trying to get a read on what’s messing with him. He concentrates so hard his eyes go slightly crossed. Nothing. Jeremy wishes he was like Professor X. His life would be so much easier if he could just tell what people were thinking as easily as reading a book. He’s in the middle of pretending like he’s really telepathic (Michael’s probably thinking How do I embarrass Jeremy next? or How did I leave the house looking less perfect than normal?) when Michael turns around abruptly, and damn, he must have some sort of sixth sense that lets him know when Jeremy’s looking at him, because this is the second time he’s been caught staring. They make eye contact and Jeremy feels like he’s been electrocuted. He glances away quickly and pretends to be deeply absorbed in the mechanics of his gel pen, but finds his line of sight steadily sliding back over to Michael, who is now, wow, that’s weird, actually staring back.

Despite the fact that Michael’s currently rocking bedhead and some seriously dark under-eye circles, he still looks hotter than he has any right to be. There’s an echo of surprise in his expression, but mostly, he looks thoughtful. Jeremy can feel a blush slowly crawling up his neck, and tries to force his expression into something resembling carefully neutral.

Michael raises a tentative peace sign in Jeremy’s direction.

Jeremy feels the blush explode across his face. He’s not sure if it’s from residual anger, embarrassment, or just how uncomfortable he is with being stared at, but he can tell he’s glowing red. He serves Michael his scariest glare, but thinks that it may not come across as angry as he intends it to be. Instead of looking intimidated or at least a little put out, Michael has started to grin at him. Not the wide, sunny smile he’d been flashing yesterday, but still a soft, genuine expression.
Hey, he mouths across the room at Jeremy.

Jeremy glares harder and flips him off.

The smile drops off Michael’s face at lightspeed and he turns around in his seat. Jeremy feels a little guilty, but then remembers he can’t stand Michael and stares resolutely ahead, where the professor has drawn a pentatonic scale on the blackboard. The rest of class passes more or less uneventfully. They go around the room and do introductions, all of which Jeremy promptly forgets. The most interesting one by far was, of course, Michael’s, a concise “Hey, my name’s Michael, I’m 21, and I never fuckin’ learned how to read music.” Jeremy thinks he’s just kidding initially, but then he sees the insecurity in Michael’s eyes and remembers the joke Reyes made the other day, so he thinks, *huh, maybe he really can’t, that’s fuckin weird,* and leaves it at that.

When the class finally wraps up, almost an hour later, Jeremy swings his bag over his shoulder and walks out. He hadn’t bothered to take any notes, so he beats the rest of the students, who are all still packing up, into the hall. He’s made his way through the crowded hallway and is just about to step outside when he feels a large hand clamp down on his forearm. He spins around, startled, and comes face to face with Michael.

“Dude. Heere. Man. Can I, like, talk to you?” Michael’s leaning close, eyes bright and a little nervous behind his thick glasses. They’re blocking the exit, but Michael doesn’t seem to notice.

“You’re talking to me right now, dick,” Jeremy lashes out, glaring at Michael for maybe the thousandth time that day.

Michael rolls his eyes. “Stop looking at me like that. You know what I meant. Here.” Michael leads him through the door, outside into the August heat, and pulls him into the shade behind the music department’s building. He’s still got his hand around Jeremy’s wrist, like he’s afraid he might run away if he lets go.

Jeremy gently tugs his arm out of Michael’s grasp and hooks his hands into his pockets. Michael’s just standing there, looking him up and down, and it’s starting to make Jeremy self conscious, so he raises his eyebrows and says, “Well?”

“Oh. Oh! Right! Sorry,” Michael clears his throat and scuffs the ground with his flip flop. He makes an abortive gesture with his hands and adjusts his glasses. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, he finally seems to settle whatever internal conflict he was battling and stares at a point over Jeremy’s left shoulder.

“Sorry about yesterday. I swear I didn’t realize it was you. In the video, I mean. I don’t think anyone else recognized you, but still. I’m sorry.” He flicks his gaze back to meet Jeremy’s, and then down to his shoes. “I shouldn’t have joked about it.”

Jeremy clicks his tongue and grimaces. “It’s a little late for apologies, Mell.” Another thought occurs to him, and he finds himself getting heated. “And why are you apologizing to me anyways? If you hadn’t recognized me, you would have kept joking around and being a dick about it. You’re not apologizing because you’re sorry, you’re sorry you got caught being an asshole. If you’re gonna apologize to me, you should apologize to all the other people in the video, too. Or do they not matter because they weren’t there?” Jeremy, suddenly filled with determination, throws all caution to the wind and gets right up in Michael’s face. Michael’s only an inch or two taller than him, so he stands on his tiptoes, eye to eye with the other man. There’s less than an inch between their noses. Jeremy pitches his voice as low and intimidating as he can make it, and growls “Just because you think you’re so fucking cool doesn’t mean you can be a dick to everyone else.”
Michael jerks back, eyes dark with an emotion Jeremy can’t place. Rage? “Jesus Christ, man, it was just a joke. And I apologized. What else do you want from me?”

“I don’t know. How about you magically erase everyone’s memory of my god-awful performance? I think that’d about make up for you publicly humiliating me yesterday.”

“Me? I publicly humiliated you? I hate to break it to you, Heere, but you humiliated yourself. It’s not my fault you can’t swing for shit.”

“Oh, sure, I can’t swing. And this is coming from who? Michael Mell, some fourth-chair trumpet player nobody, some useless fucking wannabe musician who likes to pretend he’s better than everyone else. You can’t even read music, shithead. Stop acting like you’re God’s gift to jazz.”

“I’m a bassist. Fuck you, Heere.”

“Yeah? Fuck you, too. If you’re so good, prove it.”

Michael’s staring him down, breathing heavily, his shoulders pulled up in a taught line beneath his red jacket. After a few beats, he nods. “Sure. Fine. Let’s do it. Meet me in practice room 342 in fifteen minutes. Bring your repertoire.”

Jeremy stares at him incredulously. “Are you kidding me? I’m not going anywhere with you after-”

“You don’t get to insult me, make fun of my biggest insecurity, challenge me to prove my musical ability and then not follow through. You picked a fight, Jeremy, and that’s exactly what you’re getting.” Michael shakes his head, and starts to walk away. After a few steps, he looks over his shoulder and says, “I still think you seem like a cool guy, but you really need to chill the fuck out, man. Be nicer.” He turns back around and trudges off.

Jeremy feels like he’s been slapped in the face. Between his burning anger and the oppressive August weather, he feels hotter than the core of the sun. After he’s sure Michael’s not going to turn around again, he tears his cardigan off and buries his face in it, drying the sweat that has accumulated on his forehead over the past few minutes. He stays that way for a few seconds, eyes closed, trying to slow his breathing, before he takes off after Michael. If it’s a musical battle Michael wants, Jeremy’s going to deliver if it kills him. And if his blood pressure keeps spiking the way it seems prone to around Michael, it really might.

He wants to yell back at Michael, something about how hypocritical he’s being, or that a musical battle is so unbelievably high school, can’t they just work it out like adults, but his brain is stuck moving at maybe two miles an hour because all he can think about is the way Michael had called him Jeremy instead of Heere. He’s never really thought anything of his name, good or bad; he’s always just been Jeremy and nothing else. But now, after hearing Michael say it, he thinks he likes his name a little better. The way Michael said it, low and forceful and burning and a little angry… it sounded good.

Ah. Speaking of blood pressure. Jeremy blushes harder and hurriedly drops his wadded up cardigan in front of his crotch before he shuffles after Michael. He really, really needs to stop getting so worked up.

Chapter End Notes
:^) Jeremy just can't handle his rage around Michael. yep. sure. that's it. definitely.

heres chapter 2!!! please let me know what you thought of it, if you liked it, or feel free to just Vent in the comments!!! i really appreciate how much attention the first chapter has gotten, and i'm really excited to continue this story! see y'all in the next update, unless u want to come say hi or talk to me on tumblr; im coloredpencilroses!!!
Boulevard of Dreams

Chapter Notes

ok i’d definitely recommend listening to the music in this chapter....it’s not really necessary but i do think it adds a lot! enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jeremy gets a little lost in the winding hallways of the ancient music building, so by the time he finally stumbles onto the right practice room, Michael’s already setting up. He can see through the window that the room’s basically the size of a closet, but it has a piano and a few amps, and that’s all he figures they really need. He quietly opens the door, and finds his attention immediately drawn to the Michael’s bass case, where it’s resting against the wall. It’s absolutely covered from end to end in stickers. There’s easily a few hundred papering the surface of the case, but Jeremy’s able to pick out a few really noticeable ones: “Slap My (B)ass, Daddy ;)” appears in neon green in the lower left, next to an adhesive bass clef, a cartoon drawing of a panda smoking a joint and… a gay pride flag. Oh. Oh. Okay. Jeremy can feel himself starting to stare, so he quickly looks up at Michael, who has maybe the nicest electric bass Jeremy has ever seen strapped across his chest.

It’s a beautiful, two-toned polished wood build, and it gleams with an oily slickness that shouldn’t be possible, considering the lighting of the practice room is strictly fluorescent. Something about it looks strange, though, and Jeremy finds himself unconsciously leaning closer, trying to figure out what’s throwing him off.

“She’s beautiful, huh?”

Jeremy looks up at Michael, who is bent over, plugging an amp into the wall. He doesn’t want to feed into Michael’s ego, but he doesn’t want to lie, either. It isn’t the bass’s fault that it’s owned by a total dick, Jeremy reasons.

“Yeah. She’s gorgeous.”

Michael stands back up and hooks a cable into his bass, and Jeremy suddenly realizes why the guitar looks so strange. It’s got an extra string (bringing the total up to five) and is totally fretless. Classy.

Looking to fill the uncomfortable silence that’s fallen between them, Jeremy asks, “Is that a home build?”

“Yup. Tore the frets out, refinished the neck myself.”

The other man is eerily calm, especially compared to how steamed he seemed just minutes before, and it’s starting to freak Jeremy out.

“Can I ask why you’re not more...angry, or upset, or whatever right now?”

Michael slides his hands up and down the guitar’s neck a few times, slapping at the strings experimentally. “Bad vibes, bro. You can’t let any get near the bass. It ruins the tone.”

“Ah.” Okay, Jeremy thinks. He’s a total fuckin’ hippie. Jeremy sets his bag and sweater down by the door, and settles onto the piano bench facing Michael, who seems to be more or less fully set up.
“Yo. Can you give me an A? My girl’s a little out of tune.” Michael’s looking at Jeremy expectantly.

Jeremy crosses his arms and leans back against the piano. “I came here to, like, duel to the death. Get your own A.”

“What are you, five?” Michael rolls his eyes and closes the distance between them with a few steps. He moves in close and Jeremy starts to panic because it seems like he’s-- no, he can’t be-- leaning in for a kiss, but then Michael reaches over Jeremy and hits a low note on the piano. After hovering over Jeremy for a split second too long, Michael moves back, humming a low pitch, and Jeremy feels goosebumps run down his neck. He’s blushing so red they could probably name a new color based on his skin tone. Something catchy like Heere Lies Jeremy’s Dignity, maybe. Or Eternal Shame Red.

Michael stops humming, seemingly content with his tuning. He looks at Jeremy, dead on, curiously calm, and says, “You ready?”

Jeremy folds his legs on top of the piano bench and holds a hand out in front of him in a sort of after you, good sir wave that he thinks probably looks totally dorky, but he’s already started the motion, so he may as well fully commit.

Michael takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. Jeremy has a moment to think He seems pretty nervous before Michael’s hand rises up to the neck of the guitar and he picks out a few dreamy, detached notes. Jeremy’s instantly hypnotized.

He immediately recognizes the song Michael is playing (of fucking course it’s a Jaco Pastorius tune, Michael’s clearly obsessed), and is briefly incredulous because no bass player with any sense of respect should be trying to cover it, but here Michael is anyway. And Michael, surprisingly enough, is actually… playing really well. Like, really, really, really well. Like as good as Pastorius, the legendary, inimitable fusion bassist that changed the genre forever kinds of good. He’s pulling beautiful false harmonies out of thin air, weaving a gentle, emotional melody that seems too complex to be coming out of just one instrument. Jeremy’s still skeptical about whether or not bad vibes can ruin a bass’s mojo, but Michael’s obviously doing something right, because his tone is unbelievable. The notes are falling with a soft, clear weightiness into the silence between them, ringing out with a sense of confidence and fragility that shouldn’t exist in the same musician. His playing feels like crisp winter air or heavy snow falling at midnight. Something solid and deep and calm and achingly lonely.

Jeremy has no idea how long Michael has had to work to get this talented, and doesn’t really want to know what happened to him to make him play with such emotional depth. He’s honestly trying to wall the music out, because he can feel it pulling at a similar ache deep in his chest, something big and dark that he doesn’t really want to think about, but he’s so deeply moved that his eyes start to water in sympathy, and Michael must hear him inhale sharply because he opens his eyes (he’s been playing blind the whole time? The man’s a monster) and catches Jeremy’s gaze. He plucks a few more notes, nearing the end of the song, and lets out an unsure breath. “You okay, man?” Michael’s whispering, but it somehow still seems too loud in the unnatural quietness of the practice space. He keeps the music going, but is looking at Jeremy more and more intensely. It seems borderline sacrilegious to talk over such otherworldly music, but Michael’s clearly waiting for a reply, so Jeremy whispers back, “You know… Jaco only needed four strings.”

Michael stares, his face still carefully blank. “Yeah? I’m not Jaco.”

He plucks a final chord, which falls with the solid clarity of a stone into an icy well. He lets it ring until it dies out, but he and Jeremy stay frozen in place. They’re both reverently silent, somehow subconsciously aware that something important, something beyond the scope of their awareness, has just taken place.
Michael’s the first to break the quiet. He looks shaken, but he’s clearly feeling at least a little cocky. “How’s that for a ‘wannabe musician?’ Whatcha think, Heere?”

Jeremy leans back, overwhelmed, fully and uncomfortably aware that he’s sitting across from possibly the best bass player of his generation. Michael’s just that good. He’s doing things technically that a bassist four times his age might not have the skill or experience to pull off. And emotionally, tonally, he’s on a different level than anything Jeremy’s ever heard before.

Jeremy takes a few moments to compose himself before he turns to Michael and says “I think Middleborough U’s got a pretty talented performance major on its hands.”

Michael laughs, and it helps ease the tension in the room a little. “I’m not a performance major. But thanks.” “Oh. Sorry, I just sort of assumed. What, then, jazz theory? Just majoring in the bass?” “Not even close. You’re never gonna guess.”

“Music education? Composition?” Michael keeps shaking his head, a smile spreading across his face, and Jeremy grasps at a final straw. “Music business?” he asks with disbelieving smirk.

“No!” Michael takes his glasses off and rubs the heel of his hand against his eye. “God no. Nothing like that.”

“So what? What could it possibly be? There’s only so many music majors offered here, dude.”

Michael replaces his glasses and eyes Jeremy a little slyly. “When did I ever say I was a music major?”

Jeremy feels his worldview tilt ninety degrees on its axis. He stops breathing for a few seconds as he tries to fully comprehend the earth shattering implications of what Michael just said. “Okay. No. What?”

Michael leans against the wall, the picture of detached coolness. “I said I’m not a music major, Heere. What, did I break break your brain?”

“You’re fucking with me,” Jeremy says sincerely, because he has to be. There’s no way Michael can play like that and not major in music. He has the potential to be the most influential bassist of all time, and he’s only 21. He’s obviously screwing with Jeremy. Michael, talented, effortlessly chill Michael, doesn’t belong in the world of politics, or biology, or, God forbid, something soul crushing like--

“Accounting.” Michael smiles at Jeremy again, a lazy, cocky grin that has no business appearing anywhere within a twenty mile radius of the word accounting. “I’m okay at the bass, but I’d never land a gig in the real world.” Jeremy’s not even trying to hide how obviously shellshocked he is. Michael tilts his head and looks a little worried. “Shit, Jeremy. Are you okay? Like, actually?”

Jeremy shakes his head. He wants to tell Michael that he’s making an unbelievable mistake, but they just met yesterday. He doesn’t even really know Michael, and definitely has no business telling him to change majors. At a loss for words, he says the first thing that comes to mind: “So why are you in two music classes, if you’re not looking for a degree in it?”

“Electives, duh. I saved all my slots for senior year so I can take it easy.”

“God.”

It’s quiet again. Jeremy uncrosses his legs and drums his fingers against the piano bench. “No
wonder you can’t read music. You’re totally untrained.”

Michael laughs again and says “Fuck you, man,” but there’s no real malice in it. “I had the best teacher ever. Even you’ve heard of him.”

“Oh yeah? Who?”

“Me.”

This time, Jeremy and Michael both throw their heads back and laugh. Jeremy hates to admit it, but it feels good. He’s thinking that maybe he misjudged Michael, maybe he really is just a big, friendly, well-intentioned goofball stoner, when Michael’s laughter peters out and he says “Alright. Your turn, Heere.”

A sliver of dread ices into Jeremy’s gut. “My turn for what?”

“I bared my metaphorical musical soul. Now you.” He motions towards the piano. “I don’t think it’s really a duel anymore, though. The vibe’s all wrong for fighting. I’m just curious. Show me what ya got.”

Jeremy can feel himself freezing up, but Michael’s looking at him with such a warm, open expression that he can’t bring himself to resist. “I’m probably pretty rusty…” he mutters lamely.

“I don’t mind.”

Jeremy turns to the piano, a mellow brown upright. He can feel Michael moving behind him. After a few seconds, he appears in Jeremy’s periphery, leaning against the wall beside the piano. His bass is still hanging off his shoulders.

“Hit it.”

Jeremy exhales quickly, maybe a little panicky, and sets his hands on the gleaming ivory notes. He’s so nervous that his fingers lock up, and the first chord immediately falls flat and dissonant. He jerks his hands off the keys like he’s been burned and quickly curls them together in his lap. He forces a halfhearted laugh and says, “I told you. Rusty.”

Michael reaches over and plays a tentative chord. “It didn’t sound rusty to me. It just sounded like you played a wrong note. And wrong notes don’t matter in jazz.”

Jeremy raises his head slightly. Okay. One false start. It’s fine. He’s fine. He rests his hands on the keys again and plays a few more hesitant chords. They sound flat and unexpressive even to his own ears, but he keeps playing. Jeremy doesn’t remember if he used to be good at jazz, but now he solos like he’s trying to speak a foreign language. The phrases are clunky and awkward and his expression is hopelessly wrong. They’re the right notes, he’s sure of it, but they just sound so lost and uncertain. Nothing like they’re supposed to. He plinks a few more keys, feeling more and more disheartened with every awkward, stumbling beat, when Michael suddenly plays a phrase of the melody in unison with him, and it shocks Jeremy so badly that the next phrase flows smoothly out of his hands before he has a chance to second guess himself.

“Hey, I actually know this one. Do you care if I duet you?” Michael’s still leaning against the wall, but he’s tilting his head back and looking at Jeremy as he plays along. His face is unguarded, and Jeremy can’t place exactly what expression Michael’s serving him, but his best guess is something along the lines of… smitten? He’s probably just really feeling the music, Jeremy rationalizes.

“Go ahead.” Jeremy feels a little intimidated, because he’s sure he’s going to screw up and throw
Michael off and embarrass himself, but Michael’s already starting to pluck out an accompaniment, so he figures it’s too late to change his mind.

He’s still playing a little stiff, but Michael’s bass is melding smoothly in the range between his lower octaves and the melody he’s rolling off on his right hand, softening the messy rhythms he’s stumbling over into something smooth and dreamy. He plays a few more phrases, warming up to the feeling of the music and Michael’s clean, lyrical style, when he feels Michael’s tone shift. It’s still impeccably clear, but Jeremy can feel his cold edge start to melt into something sweet and warm and buttery. He’s playing more expressively, adding vibrato on sustained notes, sweeping widely into his lower range. It’s beautiful.

And surprisingly, Jeremy can feel himself following Michael’s lead. It isn’t anything he’s actively thinking about; he’s lost in the ebb and flow of the bass. He’s being pulled along in Michael’s wake, and it feels solid, and the notes aren’t tripping out of his hands anymore, instead they’re flowing with a soft, understated musicality. He’s playing like he never thought he’d be able to play again, and his chest is so crowded with emotion that he thinks he’s going to be suffocated by his own feelings, and then he realizes that he knows how to put that into the music. He sits up a little straighter and plays a little louder, and then suddenly pushes Michael into a sweeping rallentando. He feels the bass resist a little at first before Michael seems to catch on, and then something clicks into place and they’re playing in sync. Jeremy doesn’t know why he’s suddenly able to play like this, he doesn’t know what’s different, but he can’t stop to think because he’s too caught up in the Michaelmichaelmichael flowing into his music. They play the theme a few times before Jeremy gets a little daring and drops his left hand an octave, rolling a deep chord up, up, up into a glittering golden arpeggio. It’s simple, but effective, and it feels so right that he does it again. Jeremy sees Michael move in the corner of his vision, standing up straighter, but he’s too lost in the music to care.

Then Michael unexpectedly pushes into the melody line, soloing a phrase, syrupy sweet and smooth and Jeremy feels like he’s just touched a live wire. Instinctively, he pushes back, comping chords and shoving Michael out of the melody and into the accompaniment. Michael’s bass drops out for a second and Jeremy stumbles over a phrase, afraid he’s pushed too far, before Michael falls back in, twice as emotional, tugging Jeremy into a dramatic crescendo, scaling up, leaning heavily into the chords, and they must be psychically linked or something, because they both hesitate for a fraction of a beat and meet each other’s eyes as they hit the final chord in the build, and Jeremy feels like a dam has broken open in his chest, and he remembers exactly why he used to love jazz so much.

He’s staring openly at Michael, and Michael’s staring back. They’re playing in perfect unison, now, and it really does feel like Jeremy’s telepathic, because he can tell exactly what Michael’s going to do before he does it. He can feel the shape of Michael’s thoughts through his bass line; optimistic and smoothly confident, like come on, Jeremy, rallentando! Now pull back, really, delay, stick with me, we’ve got this, and he’s not even paying attention to what he’s playing anymore; he’s lost in Michael’s eyes, fully absorbed into the tenuous but impossibly deep connection they’ve managed to forge with each other in the music. After another impressive swell and break in the melody, the intensity edges off and Michael backs down, allowing Jeremy to lead. He plays a section alone, quiet and sensitive, and he can feel whatever’s letting him play so well threaten to tip off balance, but then Michael joins back in and he feels centered. Together, they dip back down into a repeat of the opening theme, soft and delicate and emotional. Michael subverts the theme a touch, sliding into a deep, warm tone, and Jeremy can feel him smiling through the music, saying Alright, Heere, wind it down, so he does. He solos again for a phrase, before Michael joins him in one last repeat of the main phrase and they finally taper off, Jeremy caressing a glassy, clear chord in the upper octaves of the piano, Michael picking a quiet arpeggio.

The last note fades off, but Jeremy stays frozen. He feels lightheaded and shaky, and honestly totally emotionally drained. He never thought he’d play jazz again, and still isn’t sure that he wants to keep
playing if it’s always going to be this taxing. Michael doesn’t look too great either; his face is heavily flushed and his eyes are glassy.

Jeremy can’t bring himself to break the deep silence that has fallen between Michael and himself, and might have stayed frozen on the piano bench for the rest of eternity if the quiet hadn’t been shattered by a booming “Holy fuck! That was killer, dudes!” from the door of the practice room.

Jeremy jumps about a mile off the piano bench, and some deadly combination of lightheadedness, emotional exhaustion and sudden fright hits him hard. He has just enough time to hear Michael say “Jesus Christ, Rich, what the hell?” before he faints face first onto the piano.

Chapter End Notes

and here we are. :^)

i updated a lot faster than i expected to! that’s chapter three!! im thinking the next chapter is gonna be from michael's point of view, but im not for sure yet... please let me know what you thought, the response this fic has gotten has absolutely made my whole life!!! let me know what you liked, what you're looking forward to, or feel free to just Vent in the comments!!! see y'all in the next update or on my tumblr at coloredpencilroses !!
Jeremy wakes up slowly, a little disoriented. He feels disembodied and kind of insubstantial, like maybe his body is made out of sunshine. As he drifts back into consciousness, he realizes that he’s laying on his back, surrounded by something soft. Blankets. He’s on a bed. There’s a firm weight resting on his left shoulder, radiating heat. He feels too relaxed to move. Or possibly too exhausted. He stays still, breathing deeply and enjoying the tranquility of the moment. After a while, he realizes that someone is speaking beside him. He doesn’t immediately recognize the owner of the voice, but their tone is steeped in concern. He thinks he should contribute, sit up and join in, maybe, but the conversation feels so hazy and dreamlike and Jeremy’s so tired he can’t really process what he’s hearing.

“All I’m saying is I’m worried. You call me in the middle of the night, saying you need to get fucked up, refuse to tell me why, and then leave my apartment alone at 2 AM, high as hell?”

“Rich, keep your voice down--”

“Then after eight hours of radio silence you show up to class looking like you just crawled out of a gutter somewhere, and before I can talk to you you bolt out of the room? And then, then I find you playing some obscure-ass duet with a kid I’ve never seen before, I mean really, Michael, a Tony Levin piece, the man has twenty thousand twitter followers, how hipster can you get--”

“His name is Jeremy, Jesus, he was in jazz yesterday, you know who he is.”

“The hell I do. He plays like a god. How have I not heard of him around campus when he sounds like that, huh?”

“That’s not my problem, Rich. Why are you so interested in Jeremy?”

“Because you’re so interested in Jeremy.”

“Excuse me?”

“Come on, dude. You can’t be that oblivious. I feel less like I walked in on a duet and more like I walked in on you two doing it. Your face was practically screaming “Michael Mell has a big, gay crush.””

“...We were just playing a really good song.”

“Come on, Mikey, be real.”

A pause, followed by a resigned sigh. “Okay, sure, fine, you got me, he’s cute. But he hates me.”

The warm weight on Jeremy’s shoulder (a hand?) disappears, leaving him feeling suddenly cold. He frowns at the loss of contact and shuffles deeper into his blankets. The voices pause, and then continue at a lower volume.

“Look. I’ll be right back. Don’t say anything too freaky if he wakes up.”

Silence. Footsteps, followed by a door opening and shutting. Jeremy takes a few more minutes to lay
still and wake up at his own pace. Now that he’s feeling more lucid, he’s not entirely sure he hadn’t dreamed the entire conversation. His memory feels hazier and hazier the more he tries to focus, until he’s left with nothing but a slight recollection of an argument. He lets out a deep breath and allows his eyes to flutter open, only to find he isn’t at home in bed like he assumed. Instead, he’s staring at a mint green tile ceiling covered in cobwebs. Confused, he tries to pull himself into a sitting position, but a firm hand presses into his chest and keeps him horizontal.

“Hey man, calm down, you’re in the infirmary.”

Rich is leaning over him, concerned. “How ya feelin’, pal?”

Jeremy takes a quick inventory of his body. He’s a little headachy and his face feels bruised, but all in all he’s felt worse.

“M’fine. Feels about the same as the morning after my 21st birthday.”

Rich snorts, apparently relieved that Jeremy’s feeling well enough to joke. He leans back and allows Jeremy sit up.

“Your 21st? Did you party too hard?”

Jeremy adjusts his pillows so they’re cushioning his lower back. He looks around, quickly noting that they’re the only people in the room. “If your definition of ‘party’ is ‘chugging Smirnoff alone in a dorm room,’ then yeah. I’m a party animal.”

After a few seconds of silence, Jeremy glances up at Rich, who looks half horrified, half amused. Jeremy thinks the joke was maybe too dark, so he starts to backpedal just as Rich howls with laughter. And he really does mean howl. Rich’s laugh is reminiscent of a dying hyena. He’s starting to turn red, so Jeremy reaches over and thumps him on the back.

Rich wipes a tear away and slumps down in his chair. “You can’t just say shit like that without warning me, man. I think you just about killed me.”

“Yeah? I could say the same to you.”

Rich soberes up immediately. “I’m really sorry about that. I didn’t expect you to just drop out of nowhere, though. It was honestly kinda scary.” He pauses and runs a hand through his hair before he looks back up at Jeremy, smirking a little. “You’re lucky Mikey was there.”

“Michael? Why?”

Rich raises an eyebrow and pointedly looks Jeremy up and down. “I’m built as fuck, but man, you’re over a half foot taller than me, easy. I would have had to drag you here by your ankles. Michael just scooped you up like a bag of potatoes and carried you here.”

Jeremy feels his face start to heat up. “He carried me? It’s almost a mile walk from the music department…”

“Yeah, man. But that’s just how Michael is. If he cares about you, he’s crazy loyal. Like, to a fault.”

Jeremy shakes his head quickly. “He doesn’t care about me. At best, we’re vaguely acquainted with each other. At worst, there’s mutual dislike.”

Rich shrugs animatedly and links his hands behind his head. “Sure dude. Yeah. Mikey just likes to spend his free time hauling around the lifeless bodies of frail jazz pianists. Sounds about right.”
Jeremy’s jaw drops a fraction in disbelief. “I’m not fucking frail, I’m a fully grown, adult man, you have no right to--”

Rich cuts him off. “Dude, have you seen yourself?”

Jeremy starts to bite back before he remembers the morning’s wardrobe issues and his mouth snaps shut. He’s pissed that Rich thinks he can joke about Jeremy’s looks, but at the same time, he isn’t wrong.

Seemingly sensing Jeremy’s anger, Rich’s expression softens and he leans forward again. “Look, man. I wasn’t trying to be mean. All I’m saying is that maybe there’s a reason you’re fainting like an over dramatic Victorian duchess every five seconds--”

“Once, I fainted once--”

They’re interrupted by the sound of a door opening. Jeremy whips his head around and sees that Michael’s shuffling into the room, pushing the door open with his hip. He’s carrying several plastic bags and what looks like a pair of slushies. He calls out, “Hey, Rich, I couldn’t find the protein bars you wanted, but--” He cuts off when he notices Jeremy sitting up in his cot. He seems briefly relieved until his eyes start flicking back and forth between Jeremy and Rich.

“...Yeah. Uh-huh. I’m getting some seriously weird vibes right now. Did I walk in at a bad time?”

Jeremy looks over at Rich, who’s back to leaning casually in his chair. The epitome of chill. “No, we’re totally good. Just having a talk. Man to man. Am I right, Jer?” Rich shoots him a wink, adding a finger gun for good measure.

“Don’t call me that.” Jeremy’s having none of it.

After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, Michael shrugs and walks over to Jeremy’s bed. “O-o-0-okay. That was weird as fuck, but I’m willing to overlook it because I come bearing gifts. Of a metric fuckton of 7/11 snacks.”

He falls heavily into the chair on Jeremy’s left and hands Rich a slushie before he sets his bags on the edge of the bed. He starts to rifle through them before apparently changing his mind and upending them across Jeremy’s lap.

Michael wasn’t kidding about having a ‘metric fuckton’ of snacks. He must’ve bought one of everything in 7/11. Jeremy’s got a pile of candy about a foot tall spread over the end of the bed, but Michael’s still upending bags. Rich must spot something he likes, because he makes an enthusiastic noise and reaches across Jeremy’s legs to grab a brightly colored package. Skittles? Michael is settling back with a packet of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. Jeremy shifts a little awkwardly, unsure if he’s invited to join in to the miniature snack party that has just broken out across his cot. He fumbles for something to say, before settling on “Dude, do you own stock in 7/11 or something?” It sounds totally dorky and he cringes a little, but it gets a quiet laugh out of Rich, which counts as a win in Jeremy’s book. He relaxes, feeling slightly more at ease now that Michael’s back in the room. Being alone with Rich was interesting, and not entirely pleasant. Jeremy’s just starting to wonder how Michael got all this food up to his room without being stopped by a nurse when he feels his stomach growl. Loudly. He quickly presses a hand to his middle to quiet it because he’s already embarrassed enough as it is and doesn’t want to look needier than he already feels, but Rich and Michael must notice because they both start to shove food in his direction at the same time:

“Dude, here, try these poptarts--”
“Hey, do you want some M&M’s?”

“Nah, nah, these chips are the best, trust me--”

Jeremy starts to gratefully accept the armload of snacks Michael’s pushing towards him, but briefly hesitates. He knows Michael probably doesn’t like him all that much, and Jeremy can’t really blame him. After all, he’s flipped Michael off every single time they’ve interacted so far, and Jeremy hasn’t gone out of his way to hide his instinctually strong dislike. Sure, he could lie to himself and say he was a dick to Michael because Michael was a dick to him first, but truthfully, he decided to dislike Michael from the moment he saw him. He made a snap judgement and didn’t even pretend to give Michael a chance. He remembers Michael’s exasperated voice: “You really need to chill the fuck out, man. Be nicer.” Michael has every reason to hate Jeremy. In fact, Jeremy’s pretty sure Michael does hate him, or is at least annoyed by him, and is just pretending to be nice to keep up appearances. But if that was true, it didn’t really explain why Michael was still here, visiting him in the infirmary and sharing his food. And it certainly didn’t explain why he carried Jeremy across campus after he passed out (fainted, his brain supplies helpfully, you fainted like a little old lady with sunstroke).

Toying with the wrapper on a bag of Twizzlers, he glances between Rich and Michael.

“It’s not that I’m not thankful, but… can I ask why?”

Michael tilts his head. “Why what?”

“Why you’re being so nice to me, Jeremy thinks, but instead he says “Why you’re sharing your food with me.”

“Cause the nurse said you probably passed out from low blood sugar. Cause you’re not eating well.” He raises an eyebrow at Jeremy and pointedly offers him a chocolate bar.

“No. I don’t mean why, I mean...why me?”

Michael still looks lost, so Jeremy clarifies, “I was a total dick to you. You have no reason to sit here with me, or share your food, or, or whatever it is you’re trying to do right now.”

Michael leans back in his chair, looking suddenly uncomfortable. “I guess...I’m not really sure. I know this might sound lame, but it just seemed like the right thing to do?” He shrugs helplessly.

Jeremy shoots a look at Rich, as if to say, “See, he would have done it for anyone, he’s just being nice, obviously,” but Rich has beat him to the punch and is absolutely radiating a smug “I told you so” expression.

Jeremy rolls his eyes and tears into a strawberry poptart. And then another. And then a bag of chips, followed by a Kit-Kat bar, and he thinks he must look like a starving dog from the way Michael and Rich are starting to stare at him, so he coughs uncomfortably and curls his hands back into his lap. He really hadn’t realized how hungry he actually was.

Michael and Rich exchange a look across the cot for a few seconds too long, and then turn to Jeremy in unison. Michael leans forward first and places a reassuring hand on Jeremy’s calf over the blankets.

“Heere…” He pauses. “Jeremy. When’s the last time you ate a full meal?”

His voice is casual and friendly. Jeremy’s tempted to answer with some sarcastic comment or a stupid joke until he meets Michael’s eyes and realizes the other man looks legitimately concerned, despite his deceptively laid back tone. He swallows back a snide Why do you care? and forces himself to really think. He’d been in too much of a rush to eat today, and yesterday he was too
anxious, and the day before that...yeah, two days ago he’d had some toast, and...he’s been silent for too long. Michael’s expression is still calm, but his grip on Jeremy’s calf has started to tighten incrementally. Rich has set his skittles down and is leaning towards Jeremy’s cot, face unreadable.

“Uh...define full meal?”

Michael’s hand twitches on his leg.

Rich breathes out once, too harsh to be a sigh. He scrubs a hand over his face and looks up at Jeremy silently for a few moments. “Look, man. I know we don’t really know each other, and this may be crossing a line, but...are you doing alright? Like,” he gestures vaguely at Jeremy, “with everything?”

Jeremy squints at him, confused. “Yeah? The passing out is new, but I’ve always been a little on the thin side. It’s just how I’m built.”

Michael shakes his head slowly. “There’s being lean, and there’s being so light I can carry you for a mile using one arm. Definitely not the same thing.”

Rich sighs again. “Okay. Yeah. Yep. I’m just gonna say it.” He rubs his hands together. “Jeremy, you don’t have to go through this alone, alright?”


“Uhh, sorry, I don’t…I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

Rich places a tentative hand on his ankle. “Look, I know it’s really common for musicians, but drug abuse is a serious problem. If you’re going through withdrawal, we can get you help.”

Jeremy’s heart skips a beat. He feels his jaw drop for the second time in the past few minutes as he sputters, “I--wh--huh? Withdrawal? What?” He’s blindsided. His blood is running ice cold. He’s never even smoked pot before. Yeah, he drinks sometimes, but he’d never so much as consider trying hard drugs. What the fuck?

Michael’s looking a little more uncertain, but Rich plows ahead. “I know we literally just met, but if you ever need anything, we jazz musicians are like family, we have to stick together, and God knows we don’t need another Chet Baker-style tragedy--”

Jeremy buries his face in his hands. “No, no, stop, pause. What the fuck? Who said anything about…?” He glances around the room before he hisses “…about drugs?”

Rich pats his ankle consolingly. “It’s okay, man, we’re not judging you.”

“What? There’s nothing to judge! I’m not on drugs, really. I just got too hungry and passed out. I’m fine.”

“Huh. Are you sure?” Rich makes a sarcastic ‘hmm’ noise. “The med students in the lobby were trying to treat you for opiate withdrawal from the second Michael walked in the door with you. Something about ‘unhealthily thin’ and ‘passing out in public’ must really scream ‘drug abuse’ to them.”

“I think I would know if I was addicted to heroin!” Jeremy snaps, scandalized.

“Rich, leave him alone.” Michael takes his hand off Jeremy’s leg and sits back. He’s still clearly uncomfortable, but his expression is tinged with an edge of steely determination. “Alright, we believe
you. You’re not addicted to crack. That’s good. But you’re definitely not okay, man. Healthy people don’t just faint like that.”

Jeremy’s split. He wants to be indignant. He’s a fiercely independent person and doesn’t enjoy being condescended to, and Michael implying that he can’t look after himself is a major blow to his ego. But on the other hand...he can’t deny that Michael has a point. He doesn’t really have any friends, he doesn’t even have a roommate, and it’s been surprisingly difficult to be concerned with staying healthy when no one else is concerned about him, full stop.

Jeremy pats out a soft rhythm on his thighs, trying to make sure he correctly phrases what he wants to say. He tries to force his voice to be firm, but he can tell he just sounds sad.

“You’re right. I’m not...doing my best right now. I’ve been kind of stressed and anxious, and I’ve been losing weight like crazy--”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Rich interrupts.

Jeremy continues over him, heating up. “--but I can look after myself. I’m not some delicate wilting flower, I’m an adult, and I don’t need you guys pretending like you want to be here checking up on me. I appreciate you getting me here, but that’s it. We’re not friends. Don’t act like you care about me. You don’t even know me.”

“Dude…” Michael looks slightly devastated. “I played Jaco for you. We did a duet. That’s totally friendship.” Surprisingly, Jeremy feels a little guilty until he notices Rich is smirking at him with a devious glint in his eye.

“Okay, point taken. You think we’re insincere because we don’t really know you. But you can’t deny that I did almost kill you. That’s real.”

Jeremy nods, wary. “Yeah, so?”

Rich smiles. It reminds Jeremy of the way a wolf looks just before it tears into a defenseless prey animal. “So I feel guilty. For a real reason. You should let me make it up to you.”

Jeremy hesitates. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, Mikey and I were gonna grab some dinner together later. If you’re feeling up to it, why don’t you come along? My treat.”

His first instinct is to refuse because Rich is acting almost unbelievably suspicious. But he’s a senior music major and turning down free food is practically sacrilege. He looks over to Michael to gauge his reaction, who is staring at Rich, eyes wide, but expression purposefully blank. Jeremy’s first impression is Oh, he’s really fuckin angry, damn, but then he notices that Michael’s ears are burning red, and he suddenly reads as embarrassed. Which is ridiculous, because what could Michael Mell, the coolest man alive, have to be embarrassed about?

“Well, if Michael doesn’t mind…” Jeremy trails off doubtfully.

Michael opens his mouth and looks like he’s about to say that he does mind, actually, very much, but Rich shoots him a glare and he shuts up.

“Alright, Jeremy. It’s a date.” Rich winks.

Michael blanches and quickly stands up, pulling Rich over to the door with a muttered, “You’re unbelievable.” Rich, laughing as Michael furiously attempts to bundle him out of the room, tells
Jeremy “He’ll pick you up at 7.”

Michael finally succeeds in forcing Rich into the hall. As he starts to leave, Jeremy calls after him, “Hey, dude, you left your snacks!”

Michael turns around, blinding smile in place, and Jeremy finds himself suddenly a little short of breath. “Keep ‘em. I bought them for you, after all.” And then he whips back around and vanishes into the hall.

As the door swings shut, Jeremy presses his hand to his stomach again. Butterflies? No, he’d probably just eaten too much sugar. That’s all. Totally.

Chapter End Notes

....Rich is the Smoothest Wingman

:^) and thats ch4!! not too much jazz this chapter, besides Chet Baker. please let me know what you liked, what you're looking forward to, or just plain Vent at me in the comments..!!!! i'm having a lot of fun writing this.....and I think the next chapters gonna be pretty interesting........:^) ill see y'all in the next update, or u can come say hi on my tumblr @ coloredpencilroses !!!!!!!
When Jeremy finally makes it back to his dorm, it’s already past 5. He had a hell of a time trying to convince the resident doctor that he wasn’t suffering from a debilitating drug addiction, and ended up leaving the clinic with a fistful of pamphlets on topics ranging from ‘So You’re Addicted to Crack Cocaine’ to ‘Balanced Meals 101.’ He tosses the ones about drug addiction immediately, but hesitates when he gets to the one about eating healthy. After a few seconds of deliberation, he sets it on his nightstand.

He’s hit by a tidal wave of exhaustion as he sits down on the edge of his bed and tosses his bag onto the floor. What a weird day, he reflects to himself. It seems like it’s been an eternity since he woke up that morning. Between fighting with Michael, playing a duet with Michael, and then passing out and being carried to the hospital by Michael, it feels like the day has dragged on for weeks. He sits back and wonders why his life is suddenly so Michael-centric, until he’s hit by an exciting revelation-- how could he have forgotten, Jesus Christ-- he had played jazz. And he did...fine. Actually, Rich’s enthusiastic response seemed to imply he’d played better than just fine. But how? Why now, after three years? Maybe he’d just needed to take a long sabbatical before he magically got fluent in jazz again. Or maybe becoming a college senior had unlocked his latent jazz abilities, the same way you can get, like, new skill sets when you level up in Skyrim. He just didn’t have enough XP as a freshman.

Curious, Jeremy sits up and reaches into the space between his bed and the floor. After a few seconds of searching, he rescues an electric keyboard from the dusty abyss. He stands up and drags the piano over to an outlet, clearing a textbook off of his keyboard stand on the way. Once he gets set up, he cranks the volume high and plunks a few low notes. The sound’s a little buzzy, but nothing awful. He settles in and hesitantly runs a few scales, waiting for the sharp, electric thrill he’d felt earlier to return. C major. G major. B flat. Maybe...F blues?

Nothing. He doesn’t know what he was expecting. He distinctly remembers the warmth that invaded his playing, but now he’s lost the feeling. He probably just can’t replicate his sound on the old, cheap keyboard, Jeremy rationalizes, but still feels disappointed. He plays a morose, dissonant note, rumbling a low octave in his left hand. He turns it into an angsty set of chords he heard in a punk song on the radio one time a few weeks back, mashing the heavy, dark bass line into a muddy, angry mess. Maybe he can’t play jazz on command, but he’s still got alt-rock on his side.

Someone pounds on the wall of Jeremy’s dorm, spooking him into a wrong chord. “Man, shut the fuck up! Some of us are tryna sleep!” Jeremy can tell he’s blushing, embarrassed, and nobody’s even in the room to see him. Christ. He halfheartedly yells back, “It’s five-thirty in the afternoon!” but still obediently unplugs his piano. He’s got to shower, anyways.

He grabs a towel and the small, plastic tote bag he uses to keep his bathroom stuff in. He’s got some shampoo and conditioner with aggressive “For MEN!” branding, and a bar of lilac scented soap in a pink wrapper. The juxtaposition always makes him laugh a little, remembering the first time he went shopping with his dad for college supplies:

“Here, Jer, we gotta get you some shampoo and stuff. You’re not gonna impress any ladies if you show up to class greasy every day.” He reaches over and playfully ruffles Jeremy’s shaggy mop of
Jeremy dodges out of his grip, laughing. He grabs the first bar of soap he sees, something flowery and tropical-smelling. He tosses it into the cart, followed by a tiny hand sanitizer. He’s closely inspecting something called a ‘bath-bomb’ (is it, like, a nuke for germs?) when he hears his dad stifle a laugh behind him.

“Oh, Jeremy. I found the perfect shampoo for you, kid.”

Jeremy turns to his dad expectantly. He’s holding a small, black container of shampoo in front of himself, Simba style. The label reads ‘For MEN ONLY’ in an angry red font.

His dad clears his throat and puts on a stupid WWE announcer voice. “This shampoo is only for tough, manly men who like to smell like pine trees! No girls allowed!”

Jeremy collapses into a fit of giggles, and grabs the matching conditioner. “I think if I use this stuff, it’ll automatically turn me into a frat boy.” He pretends to pour the conditioner onto his head, and holds his hands out in front of himself, like a zombie. “Urgh...must...binge drink...and objectify women...” Jeremy’s dad guffaws, and does the same with the shampoo. He lets his eyes roll back into his head and groans, “Son... I’m not your dad anymore... my name... is Chad...and I’m a twenty-two year old business major...”

Now they’re both laughing so hard they can barely breathe. They must be making a racket, because a small sales girl steps into the shampoo aisle and clears her throat. “Are y’all okay over here?”

Between bursts of Jeremy’s laugh, his dad manages to say, “Can we ask you why the soap is... gendered?”

The sales girl snaps her gum. “I dunno. That’s all from corporate.”

Jeremy falls into a fresh round of laughter. His dad smiles down at him, and ruffles his hair again. He feels like he should be embarrassed, he’s eighteen and in public with his dad, for fuck’s sake, isn’t that totally uncool, but he can’t find it in himself to feel anything other than warm and happy.

Jeremy forcefully pulls himself out of the memory. It’s a happy one, but painfully nostalgic. He misses getting to see his dad every day, joking around with him after school, watching late night talk shows together on friday nights. He really needs to call his dad more often.

He slips on a pair of plastic flipflops and heads out of his room to the communal bathroom at the end of the hall. He’s showering at a weird time, so he’s got the bathroom all to himself as he quickly strips and hops into a shower stall, looping his towel and bag over the door. He cranks up the hot water and feels the tension in his back evaporate almost immediately. It feels so good that he physically moans out loud, a distinct “Oh, fuck,” that has him cringing and slapping his hand over his mouth before he remembers that he’s the only one there.

He tries to speed through his shower, aware that he’s on a schedule. He washes his hair quickly but thoroughly, only stopping to try and shape his hair into a sad mohawk à la Ferris Bueller once. When his normally wavy hair is laying straight like it is now, it flops into his eyes and waterfalls down the back of his neck. He’s really due for a haircut soon. He rinses out his conditioner and soaps up his arms and legs, washing off the stress of the day. As he starts to scrub his chest, his mind wanders.

He can’t believe Michael carried him. For a mile. He hadn’t really pegged Michael as that kind of guy. Although, now that he’s thinking about it, he can’t understand why. Michael’s tall and broad
shouldered, wide in the kind of way that says ‘I could probably bench Jeremy without breaking a sweat.’ Jeremy spent a lot of time in high school trying to get built, but it never really worked for him, and he’s jealous that other people can be so effortlessly strong. He remembers Michael, concerned, saying “…I can carry you for a mile using one arm,” and he’s taking it totally out of context, he knows that…but the thought still gets him keyed up. He lets his hand drift lower, spreading soap down his pecs to his stomach. He’s jealous of Michael. That’s all. He can feel a flush climbing up the back of his neck and his hand sinks a little lower, until-- he’s interrupted by a shrill beeping noise from outside of the shower stall. His six o’clock alarm. Jeremy turns the water temperature as low as he can make it go, and stands underneath the freezing spray, shivering, waiting until his temperature dips back down to normal.

He pads back to his dorm wearing only a towel around his waist, enjoying the feeling of the cool air against his bare chest. He struggles to get his door open with only one hand, and almost loses his towel for a terrifying second, but manages to make it inside without flashing any innocent bystanders. Once the door closes behind him, he drops his towel and stands in front of his closet. It’s small, maybe only three feet wide, but he doesn’t have a very expansive wardrobe, so the size doesn’t pose any problems. He takes a light blue button-up out of his closet and tosses it onto his bed, and after a moment of consideration adds a grey blazer to the pile. After swiping on some deodorant and misting himself with cologne, he pulls on a pair of triforce patterned boxers and dark skinny jeans. The pants stay up a little better than his others, but he doesn’t want to risk anything embarrassing happening, so he slips a belt on after he tucks his shirt in and shrugs into the blazer. When he looks in the mirror, he feels like he’s still missing something, so he rifles through his closet and tries a looped scarf, which he promptly ditches in favor of a skinny navy tie.

All in all, Jeremy feels like he’s put together a surprisingly cool look. He almost looks...stylish. The fitted blazer he’d gotten from his dad on his 21st birthday is flattering, and he looks more fashionably lean than unhealthily skinny. He runs a brush through his damp hair and winks at his reflection, trying a few different facial expressions he’s picked up from Rich. He’s trying to project suave confidence, but he just looks geeky. As always. Jeremy gives up and flops backwards onto his bed, starting to feel a little anxious. What if he’s overdressed? Or underdressed? Rich never said where they were going for dinner. What if it’s, like, a super fancy five star restaurant? They’re all college students, though, so it probably isn’t anywhere too expensive.

He pulls out his phone to text Michael and ask if there’s a dress code before he realizes he doesn’t have Michael’s number. Oh well. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply a few times, trying to center himself. He hums a refrain of his duet, kicking his legs into the air. After a few minutes, he checks his phone again. 6:50. Jeremy closes his eyes again, until a thought occurs to him and he sits up, stomach suddenly icing over. He never told Michael where he lives. He scrambles to unlock his phone, and pulls up his contacts, desperately scrolling for the number he knows he doesn’t have. He cannot believe this. The first social event Jeremy gets invited to in forever, and he never told his ride where to get him. Fucking typical. He taps on the twitter app, hoping to God Michael has an account so he can DM him or something. He quickly types in ‘Michael Mell’ and gets absolutely nothing. He tries again, a little more desperately, adding ‘bass’ to the search terms and--there. He clicks on the profile picture, which is Michael beaming up at the camera with a slushie balanced on his head, only to find that the account is privatized. Goddamn it. He hits ‘request follow’ and sits back, prepared to wait as long as he needs, but is surprised by a near-instantaneous follower notification. He pulls up Michael’s page and shoots him a quick DM:

--Hey Michael, I just realized I never told youwh ere I live…..
He laughs incredulously. What the fuck is ‘owo’?

--.....okay. I live in the Vizzini dorms, over in the NW side of campus. Are u still picking me up?

-- Michael is typing...

--yea kid im on the way. sory i forgot to ask u abt where to pick u up. bad manners of me. c u at 7. i’ll be outside in the ugliest car you’ve ever seen in your entire life uwu

Jeremy locks his phone and takes one last look in the mirror. The blue in his shirt makes his eyes stand out, his wavy hair is framing his face attractively, and he feels unusually confident about himself. He fluffs a hand through his hair like his dad used to, and can practically hear his voice saying, “Have fun, kid. Don’t party too hard,” as he wanders out of his room and down to the dorm’s lobby.

Jeremy tries to look chill and nonchalant, leaning casually against the brick exterior of the dorms, but probably just succeeds in looking awkward and gangly. He only waits outside for around five minutes, but it feels like an hour before Michael finally pulls into the parking lot in, wow, yeah, the ugliest car Jeremy has ever seen. It’s an old, bronze P.T. Cruiser convertible, the kind that looks like the designers just cut the top off of the regular model with a saw and called it good. Michael rolls up with his elbow hanging out the window, wearing big black shades, his hair gelled back. He would look like an undercover celebrity if it weren’t for the hideous car. He stops right in front of Jeremy, already reaching over to pop open the convertible’s door from the inside.

“Hey, dude. Sorry again about the whole forgetting to ask where to pick you up thing. That was my bad.”

Jeremy swings into the passenger seat and clips his seatbelt on. “No problem. I was the one who forgot to tell you.” At least he’s not too overdressed, Jeremy notices with relief; Michael’s wearing black jeans and a dark red blazer layered over some sort of graphic tee, a design Jeremy doesn’t recognize. Michael stays parked for a second, arm slung casually over the gear shift. Jeremy can’t get a read on his expression behind the dark sunglasses Michael’s wearing, but he can’t shake the feeling that he’s being stared at.

“Cute outfit,” Michael says finally, before he slams the gearshift into drive and tears out of the parking lot.

Jeremy’s briefly plastered to the back of his seat by the sheer force of the little Cruiser’s acceleration. By the time he finally adjusts to their breakneck speed, they’re already pulling onto the highway, heading east. Michael’s unusually silent, staring out at the road ahead. His cheeks are slightly red (probably windburn from driving highway speeds in a convertible, Jeremy thinks,) and he’s tapping
a nervous beat on the steering wheel.

“So…what’s the restaurant called?” Jeremy asks, a little awkwardly.

“Not sure. Rich gave me an address, that’s all I know.”

“Ah.”

“Yup.”

Michael goes back to tapping the wheel. A few minutes pass.

“How long have you known Rich?”

“A while.”

More tapping.

“I like your car,” Jeremy tries.

“Thanks.”

They sit in silence for a few more seconds before Michael reaches over and flips on the radio, just in time to catch the beginning of a new song. The tune is bright and inviting, an energetic piano riff layering over an upright bass. A silky trumpet melody joins in, and Jeremy perks up instantly.

“Oh my God, Chet Baker!”

Michael glances over at him for a second. “You in love with him or something?”

Jeremy snaps his fingers to the beat, dancing a little in his seat. “How could you not be? His tone is like silk, dude. And the way he plays…” Jeremy shakes his head. “I wish I could be even half that expressive.”

Michael grins a little. “I dunno, cool jazz isn’t really my scene. I’ve always preferred bebop. Or jazz fusion.”

“Yeah, cause you’re a Jaco fanboy.” Jeremy smiles, easing into a comfortable rhythm with Michael’s banter.

“Whatever.” Michael reaches over and turns up the volume on the radio. “I guess there’s a time and a place for Chet. And now’s pretty good.”

As Chet croons gently about getting lost together, Michael looks over at Jeremy again, apparently calculating his next words carefully. “You know what else was great about Chet?”

“What? His heroin addiction?”

“Nah. That was tragic.” Michael pauses, clears his throat. “I’m talking about his looks.”

Jeremy snorts, surprised. “Right? He was totally beautiful in his early days.”

“I would let him stab me in the throat with his trumpet, bro.” Michael’s smiling widely now.

“I want him to break my hands and tell me I’ll never be as good as Bill Evans.”

“I want Chet Baker to personally burn my apartment complex down.”
That one hits Jeremy hard, and he doubles over, wheezing from laughter. Through hiccups, he sputters, “I’d… be honored…to let Chet Baker…steal my debit card…and call me a bitch,” and then Michael loses it too, and he’s laughing so hysterically that they pull over to the side of the highway to compose themselves.

After a solid few minutes, Michael finally calms down and merges back into traffic, still giggling occasionally. “You’d let him steal your debit card? Jesus, man, you must really love this guy.”

Jeremy leans his head out of the window, enjoying the cool rush of air. “I mean, I only have like $200 in my account. I don’t know how much that would mean to Mr. Baker.”

“Fair enough.” They settle back into silence, but Michael’s still smiling and the tension in the car has blown away with the wind. It’s quiet until they pull up at the address Michael has on a sticky note on his dash.

Jeremy leans out the window as they pull into a parking space. “Whoa.”

Michael shifts into park and nods. “Whoa indeed.” He double checks the address on the sticky note against the address on the building and shrugs. “I guess when Rich said he wanted swanky reservations, he meant it.”

“I don’t think I can afford the food here,” Jeremy mutters to Michael.

Michael takes his sunglasses off and hooks them on the front of his shirt. “Me neither. Good thing Rich offered to buy, huh?”

The restaurant’s front is made entirely of black marble. Gold and white columns frame the entrance. Couples in tuxedos and cocktail dresses mill around outside chatting. Michael nudges him in the side and whispers, “Dude. Is that George Clooney?”

Jeremy squints in the direction of Michael’s frantic pointing. A tall, handsome man in a tux with grey hair is taking a photo with a group of bystanders. Huh.

They approach the entrance together, intimidated. Inside the first set of golden double doors, a woman in a black sequined dress stands behind a small podium. She smiles coolly and motions them over.

“Do you boys have a reservation?”

Jeremy looks up at Michael, who seems a little flustered. “Yeah, uh, three for Mell?” Michael’s voice tilts up, unsure.

The woman consults a golden clipboard and shakes her head. “Sorry, there’s no reservations for Mell.”

Michael pauses, and then smacks a hand to his forehead. “Oh, yeah, duh. How about three for Goranski?”

“We have a reservation for two for Goranski. Sir, can I see some ID?” The woman’s icy smile has disappeared entirely.

“Sure, yeah, hold on--” Michael fumbles in his back pocket for his wallet before handing over his driver’s license.

“I’m sorry, I need to see the ID of the reservation holder in order to give you a table.” She turns to
Jeremy expectantly.

Jeremy panics and stutters, “I-uh, no, I’m not Goranski.”

The woman raises a delicately pencilled brow. “So neither one of you is Goranski.”

“No,” Michael confirms, “but I can call him, here,” and he pulls Jeremy off to a corner by the entrance. Jeremy’s surprised by how flustered Michael is acting, especially considering how laid back he usually is.

“Is everything alright?” he asks hesitantly.

“Yeah. Yeah, I hope so.” Michael’s brow is furrowed as he quickly scrolls through his contacts list. “Rich told me he was leaving a little before I picked you up, so he must’ve gotten lost or something.” He dials a number and holds the phone up to his ear, shooting Jeremy a slightly shaky thumbs up. After a few seconds, Michael perks up and says, “Hey, Rich, everything alright? We beat you to the restaurant, you must’ve forgotten to add Jeremy onto the reservation, they’ve got it listed as a table for two--”

Rich yells so loudly that Jeremy can hear him through the receiver.

“Ha! Pranked ya, Mell! Now it’s just you and Jeremy! Havin’ a fancy dinner! Together! Table for two, bitch!”

Michael pinches the bridge of his nose. “Rich, you absolute dumbass, your name is on the reservation. We can’t get a table if you’re not here.”

A pause. Static crackles through the phone. “Oh, geez. That’s my--”

“That’s your bad, yeah. Nice one, Rich.” Michael hangs up. He turns to Jeremy apologetically. “On account of my friend Rich being a total idiot, it turns out we actually don’t have reservations here. I’m really sorry, man.”

Jeremy laughs a little. “Honestly, I’m kinda glad. I don’t think I’d be comfortable eating at a place this fancy.”

Michael smiles, relieved. “Dude, same. That lady’s clipboard probably costs more than my rent.”

They walk back outside to the car, dodging George Clooney and a few younger starlets (“Holy fuck, Michael, that’s Cara Delevigne, no don’t look, just walk, be casual, damn”).

Michael starts the car and backs out into the road, resting his arm on Jeremy’s seat so he can see out the back window. The sleeve of his blaser softly brushes the back of Jeremy’s neck and he jumps, blushing.

Michael notices his abrupt movement. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just kinda tired.” Jeremy doesn’t know why he’s so wound up all of a sudden. “And hungry. I can’t believe Rich thinks making you pay for dinner is a prank.”

“He’s an idiot sometimes,” Michael nods. “I am sorry about dinner, though. Do you wanna drive through somewhere? I can pick up something to eat. Unless,” his eyes light up, “you wanna hang out at my place?”

Jeremy must not hide his hesitancy well, because Michael immediately backpedals, “But you don’t
have to! I know that probably sounded way creepy cause we barely know each other, but I promise I’m not trying to, like, murder you or something. I just have this recipe I’ve been wanting to try out, but Rich hates my cooking, so if you felt like it I could whip something up?” He has his shades back on, carefully masking his eyes, but Jeremy picks up a tinge of vulnerability in his voice. *Oh, Jeremy realizes, he’s just as awkward about this as I am.*

He surprises himself when he says, “Yeah, sure. Sounds great.”

Michael smiles hesitantly. “Yeah? Is that alright?”

“Of course. It’s not your fault Rich tried to prank you, or whatever. Now we can bond over how badly that discussion with the clipboard lady went.”

Michael puts on a nasally voice, “‘Unhhh...so neither of you boys are Goranski? Unbelievable.’ Like, what am I supposed to do? Lie? And how would that have happened if Rich was actually there?” Michael switches to a surprisingly good imitation of Rich, “I’m Richard Goranski, a five foot four ball of muscle and bad decisions, please let me into your swanky restaurant filled with expensive and breakable things.”

Jeremy chokes on his own laughter. “How are you so good at that voice?”

“Practice. And a lot of time around Rich.”

Jeremy wonders if Michael will want to stick around long enough to get a good impression of Jeremy.

They pull up to Michael’s apartment around eight o’clock. To Jeremy’s surprise, he recognizes where they are immediately. Michael’s apartment complex is maybe a quarter mile away from campus; he can see his own dorm building from the parking lot. They trudge up the stairs to the eighth floor, and by the time Michael unlocks his door, Jeremy’s feeling a little lightheaded from climbing.

Michael tosses his keys into a bowl by the front door and flips on the light. “Here we are. Make yourself at home, dude.”

Jeremy follows Michael into the kitchen and hops up onto a barstool sitting in front of a center island. “Nice place,” he says, and means it. His apartment is surprisingly spacious for a college student’s. He’s got a living room attached to the kitchen, and a hallway leads off to Jeremy’s left, probably to the bedroom. A couch is pushed up against the wall, facing a flat screen T.V. with several consoles sitting around its base. Jeremy glances over them briefly before he double takes, because— “Holy shit, is that a Gamecube?”

Michael glances over from where he’s standing in front of his fridge. “Yeah, man. Best console of all time. Super Mario Sunshine for life.”

“I’m more partial to Windwaker.”

“Well, duh. They’re both great games. Want some wine?”

Jeremy looks back over at Michael, who’s holding a pair of wine glasses and a corked bottle. “Yeah. Sounds good, thanks.” Michael nods and pours him a glass, setting it on the granite countertop before he walks over to the sink and scrubs his hands. He turns to the stove and heats up a burner underneath a pan filled with oil. Jeremy watches curiously.
“So what’re you making?”

Michael retrieves some sliced chicken pieces from the fridge and puts them in the hot oil. “It’s called adobo. My mom used to make it all the time for me back at home. I’m trying to get it as good as she makes it, but so far I just can’t get it perfect.”

“What, do you not have a recipe?”

“No, I do. Up here.” He taps his head. “Mama just says I don’t cook with enough ‘emotion.’ I always tell her I have to save all my emotion for the bass, but I don’t think she believes me.” Michael smiles fondly, crushing a clove of garlic with the flat end of a knife. It looks practiced and professional, and Jeremy finds himself a little impressed. “You really know what you’re doing.”

“Yeah. I actually used to be a culinary major.”

Jeremy tilts his head. “How’d you end up in accounting?”

Michael tosses the garlic into the pan, along with some other spices Jeremy doesn’t immediately recognize. “I didn’t. At least, not right away. I was kind of a loose cannon my underclassman years. You name it, I tried to major in it.”


“Totally. I just didn’t have the patience.”

“Philosophy?”

“Tried it. Too boring.”

“Music performance?”

Michael pauses, adding a dash of soy sauce to the pan. “You got me there.”

“Seriously?” Jeremy’s amazed. “With the way you play, you’ve never even considered a music major?”

“I told you earlier. I’m just not good enough.” Michael stirs the chicken around reflectively. “Even if I was, there’s no money in it. I went to college so I could get a well paying, stable job that lets me take care of my mom.” He aggressively splashes vinegar into the pan. “And music just doesn’t pay the bills.”

“Huh. I guess.” Jeremy takes a sip of his wine. He can’t blame Michael for wanting the stable, supportive kind of job that music performance can’t really offer, but he refuses to believe that Michael actually thinks he’s ‘not good enough.’ He sets his glass down, running his index finger along the rim. “I just wanted to tell you, when you played the bass for me earlier...that cover of ‘Portrait of Tracy?’ That was incredible. You almost sounded better than Jaco.”

Michael fixes him with a serious glare. “Hey. That’s blasphemy. No one’s better than Pastorius.” After a moment, he breaks into a grin to let Jeremy know he’s joking. Jeremy smiles back, a little flushed. Probably from the heat of the kitchen. Michael holds his eye contact for a few seconds too long, until the contents of the pan behind him start to boil.

“Oh, shit!” He spins around and cranks the heat low, covering the pan. “Alright. Now we just let that simmer for a while.” He turns back to Jeremy. “But enough about me and my indecisive major. What’s yours?”
“Music education. I can’t play, but I love music too much to quit.” Jeremy shrugs. “And nobody would take me seriously in jazz anyway. Not after my freshman year.”

Michael looks offended. “Can’t play? You? So what was that in the practice room earlier, then? Magic?”

“I wish I knew. If I knew, I could do it again.”

“I think it’s all just in your head, man. You’re too freaked out by a little fuckup that happened three years ago, and you just freeze up when you solo.”

“Yeah, obviously. But just ‘cause it’s in my head doesn’t mean it isn’t real.”


“What does Rich know about piano?” Jeremy takes another sip of wine. It’s clearly a cheap bottle, but unexpectedly good.

“More than you’d think. He’s no Herbie Hancock but he knows his way around a keyboard. You know how drummers in high school have to have piano experience? For, like, xylophone playing and shit? That’s him.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t guess that he was a drummer. It’s so obvious in retrospect.”

“Loud, loves to be the center of attention, wears a Zildjian t shirt at every opportunity...I’d say he’s the most obvious drummer I’ve ever met. But he’s a good bandmate. That’s all that matters.”


“Not really. We only do gigs at local bars. It brings in a little cash, but it’s mostly just for our mutual love of music.”

“That sounds amazing.” Jeremy sounds bitter, even to his own ears.

Michael chuckles. “Nah. It’s just a casual little jazz trio—or at least, it used to be a trio. Now it’s just me and Rich. Not a whole lot you can do with just a bass and a drumset.” He grimaces, looking off to the side. Jeremy wants to ask what happened, but instead he blurs out, “Why are you so fucking cool?” He sounds whiny and sullen, like a little kid. God.

Michael snaps his gaze up to meet Jeremy’s. He looks slightly shellshocked. “Why am I what?”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. I’m just me.” Michael leans forward, settling his weight on the counter.

“And who you are is cool. C’mon, man. You’re friends with everybody, you always know what to say, you’re an electric bass player in a college band, you’re hilarious and you’re--” You’re hot, Jeremy wants to say, so stupidly unfairly hot, but instead he finishes, “you’re nice. It’s all so effortless. How?”

“Huh.” Michael leans forward further, resting his chin on the countertop. “I’m not admitting I’m
cool, because I’m a total fucking dork, but… I have a theory.” He taps a few times on the counter, deep in thought. “But you can’t laugh. I’ve never told anyone this before.”

“Deal.”

“Okay. So. This is how it goes. ‘Cool’ means different things to everybody. Like, to little kids, ‘cool’ is anything involving dinosaurs. To old people, cool is, like, denture cream or something, I don’t know. But you get the idea.”

“Okay, yeah, I’m following.” Jeremy laughs a little, genuinely curious.

“But. When you’re in highschool, cool is...difficult. It’s cool to act like you don’t care about anything, right? If you care too much about school, you’re a nerd. If you care too much about sports, you’re a meathead. Religion makes you a Jesus freak. Music makes you a band geek. If you don’t do anything, don’t care about anything, then you’re the embodiment of high school cool.” Michael pauses, adjusting his glasses. “In college, that all changes. People want to be around interesting people. If you went through high school not giving a shit, suddenly you’re washed up and boring. And people like me, people who care a lot about a lot of things, have depth and personality and nuance. All that matters is getting through the hell that is high school with your passions and interests intact, and then it’s smooth sailing. If you spent your time getting good at shit, creating an identity you’re proud of, or confident in, then you’re gonna click with people. It just works.”

“Wow.” Jeremy finishes the last of his wine, impressed. He never expected Michael to have a legitimate answer. He feels like kind of a dick for bringing it up.

Michael nods, uncharacteristically shy. “But I don’t know. That’s just what I think.”

“No! No, I totally get it. I’m just...wow. That’s fascinating.” A thought occurs to him. “So... does that mean you were a nerd? Before you got cool in college?”

“Oh, totally. I was peak nerd. Aside from having good grades, I’ll have you know I made the french horn my bitch.”

Jeremy laughs a little at the mental image.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up.” Michael sounds annoyed, but he’s smiling widely. He gestures towards Jeremy’s empty wine glass. “Wanna refill?”

Jeremy smiles and scoots the glass across the counter. “Sure. Hit me up.”

And that’s how Jeremy finds himself maybe a little too buzzed, two hours and a bottle of wine later. Michael’s cooking is unbelievably good and Jeremy makes sure he knows it:

“Michael. Michael, if this food was a person I would ask it to marry me. Michael. Oh my god.”

“Sure, dude. It’s only good ‘cause you haven’t eaten any real food in forever.”

Jeremy takes another bite and moans, borderline pornographically. “I’m not exaggerating. This is the best fucking thing I’ve ever eaten. Can you, like, live with me? And cook dinner every night? Oh my god.”

They screw around with the Gamecube after dinner, bringing the bottle of wine with them. Jeremy gets tired of just watching Michael explore Super Mario Sunshine, so they boot up Super Smash Bros and go to town. He’s always considered himself nigh unbeatable in a round of Smash, but today he seems to have met his match. Or his reflexes are just a little slower than normal. Or he’s distracted by Michael, who has ditched his blazer, rocking just a short sleeve tee and jeans, muscular arms on full display. It’s a good look on him, Jeremy reflects. Michael’s hair is starting to come ungelled, falling in a soft wave across his forehead, the warm orange light from the kitchen giving him a soft, fuzzy halo. Jeremy realizes he’s staring and quickly turns back to the T.V., just in time to witness Michael send his character hurtling off of a platform, and he’s officially lost his fifth match in a row.

“Damn,” Jeremy sighs, and sinks back into the couch. Michael sets his controller down and pulls his legs up onto the seat.

“What’s the matter? Tired of losing to the great and powerful Michael Mell?”

Jeremy huffs another sigh and crosses his arms. “I’m usually way better than this, just so you know.”

“Oh yeah?” Michael’s teasing him.

“Yeah.”

“Then why are you catastrophically terrible right now?”

“Cause I’m tipsy,” Jeremy blurts out honestly.

Michael tilts back into the couch, shoulders shaking in laughter. “Off a few glasses of wine? You’re a lightweight, man.”

Jeremy tosses a pillow at him. It misses by a mile. “Stop laughing. My...my toler...my how much I can drink is normally a lot more. But,” he yawns widely, “I’m skinny now.”

“I thought you were always thin?”

“Mm, yeah. But more now. Than normal.”

Michael nods, thinking. After a beat, he reaches across the couch and punches Jeremy on the shoulder. It’s light and playful, but Michael’s tone is serious. “Hey...I know you were joking earlier, about me making food for you and everything, but...if you want, we could do this again? Like, regularly?”

Jeremy shuffles a little closer to Michael on the couch. He thinks he wants Michael to punch him again. “Regularly like how?”

“Like you can come over whenever and I’ll make dinner for you. We can hang out, play videogames, whatever. You’re a really cool guy, and I had a lot of fun tonight, and if I’m being honest I kind of already consider you a friend after the last couple of days. So if you want,” he pokes Jeremy in the side, “we can make this a thing. Like, Jeremy and Michael’s videogame nights.”

Jeremy tilts over, resting his head against Michael’s legs. “Yeah. I think I’d like that.” He yawns again. “You’re warm.”

feeling alright, pal?”

“Mm.”

“Jeremy?” Michael shifts upright, moving his legs away. Jeremy lets himself fall against Michael’s shoulder.

“Mmph?”

“You good?”

“Yeah. Too much wine. I’m sleepy.” And Jeremy’s inhibitions must really be lowered because he honest-to-God nuzzles into Michael’s shoulder. Because Michael’s soft and warm, and Jeremy’s tired, and absolutely no other reasons at all. He feels Michael’s breath catch. They sit that way for a minute, before Michael shifts and his warmth disappears. Jeremy’s being gently lifted to his feet.

“Hey…” He starts to protest the loss of contact, but Michael’s back as quickly as he left, supporting his shoulders.

“Man, that wine really did take you out. Let’s get you home.”

Despite Jeremy’s near constant protests of, “I’m fine, I’m just a little tipsy, I can handle stairs, man, I swear,” Michael more or less carries Jeremy out of his apartment and out to the parking lot. He sets Jeremy in the passenger seat of his Cruiser before jogging around to the driver’s side. As he starts the car, the radio flares to life, and Jeremy smiles. “Hey. It’s Chet again.”

Michael scoffs. “You’re shitfaced enough that you can’t handle stairs, but you can recognize a Chet tune from the first phrase? Who’s the real fanboy here?” He pulls smoothly out of the parking lot and onto the street. Jeremy curls up in his seat, watching the way the street lights illuminate Michael’s profile. Chet’s singing is so satiny and romantic that Jeremy feels his chest ache a little; it’s the way he thinks infatuation should sound, and it has absolutely no business fitting so perfectly in this quiet moment that’s settled between the two of them. He finds himself singing along under his breath, enamoured by the way the wind plays with Michael’s hair.

“Funny… it’s not a star I see…It’s always you.” He takes a deep breath, singing a little louder, surprised when Michael joins in.

“Whenever I roam through roses, and lately, I often do…” Michael reaches over and cranks the volume up, so Chet’s washing over them entirely, drowning out their individual voices.

Michael drives around the block a few times, apparently reluctant to drop Jeremy off, but Jeremy doesn’t say anything. He’s just happy to enjoy the music. He feels like he’s traveled back in time to the 1920’s, jazz on the radio, wine in his veins, cruising around a little too fast in a shitty car. It’s a good feeling, soft and heady. It’s a memory he thinks he’ll be nostalgic for when he’s old and tired and looking back on his life. Music and Michael. Michael and music. The two just click.

Later that night, after Jeremy’s stripped off his button-up and downed a glass of water, he collapses onto his bed and resolutely doesn’t think about the way Michael whisper-sang the last line of the song, wearing a tiny, private smile, voice shaky but warm with some emotion Jeremy couldn’t place: “...each time I fall in love... it’s always you.”

Chapter End Notes
please let me know if you liked it, or what you're looking forward to, or just Vent at me in the comments!! see y'all next chapter, or @ coloredpencilroses on tumblr... thats where ill post chapter updates, etc, pls feel free to message me!!
In music theory the next day, Jeremy feels like his skull is filled with steel wool. Every time he turns his head too quickly, he feels a sharp pain erupt behind his slightly bloodshot eyes. He really is a lightweight, as much as it pains him to admit it. Michael was right, and Jeremy’s cranky. He plants himself in the back of the classroom, headphones on, squinting tiredly (Is the room always this bright? Jesus Christ).

A few minutes later, the door slams open with a bang that has Jeremy cringing and massaging his temples. Rich bounds into the classroom, offering Jeremy a cheerful wave. Jeremy half-heartedly waves back, hoping Rich leaves him alone to suffer through the tail end of his hangover in solitude.

“Hey, pal! You looked fucked up!” Rich calls out from across the classroom. The rest of the class turns to look at him curiously. Great. Rich swaggers over to Jeremy’s desk, pulling a pair of shades out of his bag and placing them on Jeremy’s face.

“Looks like you need these more than I do. I take it you and Michael had a good time without me last night?” He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. Suggestively of what, Jeremy has no idea.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, man.”

“Yeah, sure. Uh-huh. C’mon, I can keep a secret, you can tell me what went down.”

Rich isn’t physically making any untoward expressions, but his tone heavily implies the presence of a solicitous wink.

Jeremy adjusts his new pair of shades. They’re actually helping his headache a little. “Really. I don’t know what you’re talking about. After he called you from the restaurant, we went back to his place, he made dinner, I had a little wine--” Rich leans forwards eagerly, “--and then we played Super Smash Brothers on his Gamecube until I went home at, like, ten thirty P.M. It was a lot of fun, actually. So I guess thanks for fucking up the reservations? What happened there, by the way?”

Rich’s expression is unreadable. “Oh, nothing. I just thought it’d be a chance to like, resolve that weird-ass fight you guys had or whatever. Mikey’s not normally like that. Figured you could use a chance to get to know the good side of him. Minus me.”

“Wait, how’d you know we fought? I thought you just caught the duet.”

“He explained everything to me on the walk to the infirmary. And then over text a few hours later. He wouldn’t shut up about you yesterday.”

“I don’t blame him. I was kind of a dick.”

“Sure, but he was mostly talking about your musicianship. You play like you’re the human incarnation of Apollo or something. It’s wild. You guys sounded otherworldly good--” The door swings open again, interrupting them. Michael steps in, looking significantly peppier than yesterday. Rich spots him immediately and bellows, “Hey! Mikey!” Jeremy winces again.

“Shit! Sorry, J-man. I’ll try and keep it down.”
Michael falls into the desk to Jeremy’s left. He starts to unpack his bag before glancing over at Jeremy with an amused smirk, “Nice indoor shades, man. You’re really rocking that hangover couture.”

“Shut up, dude.” Jeremy reaches across the aisle with his foot and nudges Michael’s shin, “Your wine, your fault.”

“No way. Not a chance.”

“You enabled me!”

“Sure, I provided, but you partaked. Partook? You drank it.”

Rich sits on top of a desk facing Michael and Jeremy. He procures a drumstick from somewhere on his person and taps it on the tabletop like a gavel. “Alright, you two, order in the court. The case of “Who’s Fault is Jeremy’s Hangover?” is now being deliberated. Mr. Heere, please present your evidence.”

Jeremy laughs, confused. “Evidence? Uhh… We were at Michael’s house, so it’s Michael’s wine?”

“Objection, your honor!” Michael points a dramatic finger in Jeremy’s direction. “The evidence is purely circumstantial!”

Rich taps the drumstick again. “Sustained. Mr. Mell, please present your evidence for the jury.”

Michael nods. “Thank you, your Honorable Richness. Allow me to present a direct quote from Mr. Jeremy Heere, spoken at nine P.M. last night.” Michael tries to mimic Jeremy’s voice. “‘Bro, wanna see me chug the rest of this bottle of wine?’”

Rich breaks character to smile at Jeremy, impressed. “Dude, seriously? You did that?”

“Heh. Yeah. It was good wine, man.”

“Wow. In that case, the jury finds you…” Rich turns, searching around the room. “They find you…” His face lights up. “Jake!”

“Uhh…” Jake asks, flashing Rich a perfect white grin.

“Guilty or not guilty? Just pick one. You’re the jury.”

“Uhh…” Jake tilts his head, dark hair falling into his face artfully. Jeremy might be in love. “I’m gonna go with guilty?”

Michael whoops triumphantly. “Take that, Heere!”

Jeremy says, “Yeah, shoot, you got me,” distracted. Jake is making eye contact with him. And smiling. And now he’s waving a little. And--oh, God, fuck, he’s standing up and walking over, and
smiling more, and saying “So what was that about?”

Jeremy’s mouth freezes up and he stammers something along the lines of, “Ah! Hm. Uh. Ghuh.” Smooth.

Rich leans closer to Jake. “We’re trying to decide who’s responsible for Jeremy’s hangover. He admitted to trying to chug a bottle of wine, though, so. Basically a declaration of guilt, if you ask me.”

Jake laughs. It sounds like pure joy, and Jeremy’s heart skips a beat. What the fuck is wrong with him?

“I see. That explains the hangover shades,” and then Jake reaches over, brushes his fingertips over Jeremy’s cheekbones and gently pulls Jeremy’s glasses off, placing them on the desk. Jeremy’s face explodes in a blush, and he blinks up at Jake owlishly, blinded by the sudden brightness.

“Man, Rich was acting like you looked like a zombie or something. Don’t worry,” he softly cups Jeremy’s jaw and tilts his face up, “he’s just jealous he can’t look as good as you do after a night of drinking.”


“Whoa, hey, hangover boy. What frat party got you this bad on a Thursday night?”

Jeremy just stares, unapologetically stunned by Jake’s beauty. Michael butts in and answers for him. “No party. He was just hanging out with me. At night. At my place. Together with me. And my wine. Us. Me and Jeremy.” Michael’s response is awkward enough that he pulls Jeremy’s focus away from Jake, and damn, Michael looks pissed. His lips are pressed together into a thin line and his eyebrows are drawn down into an angry V shape, hands curled tightly on top of his desk. Rich is glancing between Jeremy and Jake, a combination of confusion and something bordering on jealousy. Weird.

Jake addresses Michael, but keeps his eyes locked on Jeremy. “That’s cool, Mell. Sounds like you’ve already got a Jeremy monopoly.”

Michael flushes. “He’s his own person. We just hung out. That’s all.”

“Good to hear.” Jake smiles thoughtfully, picking up Jeremy’s borrowed sunglasses. “Hey, party boy. I’m the resident event planner for Alpha Delta Phi, and we’re throwing a rager tomorrow night. Go ahead and stop by. If you can throw back beer like you do wine, I think you’ll fit in just fine.” He stands up, puts Jeremy’s glasses back on his face and starts to walk to his desk, before he glances over his shoulder and says, “Oh, I guess you can bring Rich and Mell if you want,” before dropping into a desk near the front of the room.

Rich and Michael stare at Jeremy in stunned silence.

Jeremy crosses his arms, slightly defensive. “What?”

“Dude.” Rich raises his eyebrows. “You just got us invited to the second most infamous frat party of the year. By Jake-motherfucking-Dillinger. And all you had to do was show up to class hungover.”

“I don’t even know who he is, why is it such a big deal?”

“It isn’t,” Michael cuts in, “Rich is just in love with him.”
“Am not!” Rich blushes pink. “I just think he’s hot. Everyone thinks he’s hot. Straight guys even think he’s hot. Jeremy, do you think Jake is hot? Like, if you had a list of guys, and you--”

“Rich, cut it out.”

“I’m just asking. Out of curiosity. Like a scientific poll. Jeremy’s my representative sample. So, Jake: hot or not?”

Jeremy stares down at the floor, hoping he isn’t as red as he feels. “He’s definitely very nice to look at.” He glances back up, accidentally locking eyes with Michael, who appears to be trying to condense himself into the smallest amount of space possible. Out of nowhere, Jeremy feels a sharp stab of guilt in his chest.

“Ha! Told ya, Mikey. Everyone thinks he’s hot.”

Michael laughs once, a short bark that sounds more sad than amused.

Rich, oblivious, continues on. “I’m just saying, he’s beautiful. He’s shaped like Chris Evans. And those shoulders? Fuck me up, honey.”

“Jesus, Rich, can you at least pretend like you have an ounce of shame?” Michael’s tone is more than a little bitter.

Rich’s mouth curls up into a small, devious smirk. “Oh, wait, what’s this? Michael, are you jealous? Of Dillinger?”

“Yeah, right.”

“You so are!” Rich playfully tosses an eraser at Michael. “Sorry, babe. I won’t talk about other boys in front of you. Or are you jealous because Dillinger was flirting--”

Rich is interrupted by the professor calling for the class’s attention. Jeremy’s glad; he doesn’t know if he could handle any more Rich-induced stress in one class period. He looks over at Michael, who apparently has his attention focused entirely on burning a hole into the back of Rich’s head. His ears are suspiciously pink, and he’s holding a pencil so tightly his knuckles are going white. Jeremy thinks about Jake, and Rich talking about how hot Jake is, and Michael’s angry “pretend you have an ounce of shame,” and then it clicks.

Of course, Jeremy thinks, It’s so obvious. Michael clearly, obviously, undeniably has a crush on Rich. Michael has a crush on Rich, (and he ignores the unexpected flash of something like heartache that tugs down his spine at the thought-- his hangover must be making him crazy moody) and it really does explain a lot. Like Michael’s anxiousness waiting for Rich at the restaurant? Worried about his crush. Carrying Jeremy to the hospital? He just wanted to show off. And he was just upset that Rich was talking about Jake, and not jealous because Jeremy kind of got flirted at. And, wow, that really did happen. Jeremy blushes a little thinking about it.

He agreed with Rich more than he let on; Jake was distractingly hot. Jeremy appraises the back of his head carefully. Jake’s dark hair looks soft and fluffy, just long enough to run a hand through. The muscles in his shoulders flex subtly beneath his shirt every time he shifts, tapping a restless beat on the desk in front of him, and, yeah, he’s got really big hands. It gets Jeremy thinking about the way Jake’s hand felt on his chin, big and warm and altogether too gentle. If he had just turned his head a little, he could’ve pressed a kiss into his palm. And then Jeremy’s thinking about kissing, and Jake, and kissing Jake, straddling the other man’s hips with his thin thighs, wrapping his arms around his wide shoulders, Jake’s strong hands roaming up the flat plane of his chest, and--Jeremy shifts and
pulls his backpack into his lap. He tries to be subtle, but Michael catches his motion and turns to Jeremy with a thin-lipped smile.

“Hey, man. Jake’s a nice guy, but… He’s a terrible flirt. And a heartbreaker. Don’t let him get to you, alright?”

_I’d let him get to me anytime, anywhere_, Jeremy thinks, but gives Michael a small smile and a nod in response.

Meanwhile, the professor is explaining a rubric of some sort. It looks like a composition project, and Jeremy realizes he probably should have been paying attention. He refocuses on the whiteboard and notes with dread that they’re supposed to be doing a duet composition… in groups. Jeremy hates group projects with an undying, hellish fervor. There’s too many chances for him to fuck up from a social standpoint, and from an academic standpoint, he always ends up managing to sabotage the grades of the entire group. The professor says something along the lines of, “Alright, everyone grab a partner,” and Jeremy’s heart rate doubles. He sees Jake turn around in his seat, and they make eye contact, and Jake looks like he’s about to say something until Michael dives in front of him and says, “Yo. Heere. Be my partner?”

Jeremy responds immediately, out of instinct. “Yeah, love to.” And in his periphery he sees Jake sit back, apparently disappointed, before Rich starts to wander in his direction. And then Jeremy feels bad and adds on, “but…don’t you want to work with Rich?”

Michael looks confused. “Not particularly. Why?”

“Oh. I just kind of…figured?”

“You’re a dork.” Michael shakes his head. “We’re friends, right? Of course I want to work with you.”

“If you’re sure…”

“Yeah, man. What instruments do you wanna compose for? Cause I’m thinking bass and piano, obviously--”

“What? No way, that’s totally taboo. No one just does a bass and a piano. You can’t get any solid structure out of it.”

Michael cocks his head, incredulous. “Are you kidding me? I’d say we got some pretty incredible structure yesterday.”


“Whoa, dude, what?” Michael looks a little panicked. “You want to do what now?”

“Not romantic like, flowers and chocolates and stuff, God. Capital R Romantic. You know, like, Debussy. Or Rachmaninoff.”

Michael shakes his head. “I don’t know who any of those people are.”

“What?” Jeremy practically falls out of his chair. He must’ve been a little louder than he intended, because a few groups have stopped their discussions and are turning to stare at Jeremy. He lowers his voice and furiously whispers, “You don’t know any Romantic composers?”
Michael shakes his head again, slightly amused. “Should I?”

“Of fucking course you should know them! What about Strauss? Chopin?”

Michael looks lost.

“Mendelssohn?”

“Nope.”

Jeremy takes one last desperate shot. “Beethoven?”

“Uh...wasn’t he blind, or something?”

“No!” Jeremy rests his forehead on the desk, exasperated. “I can’t believe you don’t know who Beethoven is.”

“Sorry, bro. I’m just not a musical history buff, I guess.”

“You don’t have to know anything about music to know about Ludwig van motherfucking Beethoven!”

“Alright, alright!” Michael holds up his hands defensively. “I get it, I’m uncultured. But I’ll strike you a deal. How about we go find a practice room and start composing, and if we get a solid start you can introduce me to the dusty, boring world of classical music?”

Jeremy sends another gentle kick in the direction of Michael’s leg. “I’m gonna make you regret calling Chopin dusty. But sure, deal.”

Michael smiles and swings his bag over his shoulder. “Let’s get started.”

It takes him a few minutes, but Jeremy finally finds an unoccupied practice room on the fourth floor of the music building. He toys around with some chords while he waits for Michael to get his bass, trying to improvise a melody. He fails to come up with anything interesting, and runs a quick chromatic down the keyboard before stumbling into a bouncy, high energy chord pattern that his hands are itching to play, and he can’t immediately place the song until he hits the hook and-- oh, hell yeah, it’s Broadway, and Jeremy gives in to the music and belts.

“Live in my house, I’ll be your shelter! Just pay me back with one thousand kisses…” It’s been awhile since he’s tried to sing and play at the same time, so he’s stumbling over a few chords, but as he warms up, it gets smoother. Nothing like a little Rent to get the musical inspiration juices flowing. The song sounds a little empty without a lower bass register, or any drums, but he thinks the exposed piano makes it sound more sensitive. He passes the first verse and flows into the chorus, improvising a little solo in his right hand where the other half of the duet should be. He refuses to sing both parts of a duet by himself--something about filling the space where another voice should be with his own seems painfully lonely, and kind of sad. So he continues singing his half of the song, filling the empty spaces with tiny improv melodies, until he’s scared halfway into next week by a deep baritone voice suddenly layering over his own, “I think they meant it when they said you can’t buy love,” and he snaps around on the piano bench, ready to fight-- and thank God, it’s only Michael.

“Ah, man, why’d you stop? That sounded amazing.” Michael shuts the door carefully behind himself, and leans his case against the wall before sitting down beside Jeremy on the bench.
“I stopped because you scared the hell outta me. You think you’d have learned not to sneak up on me after yesterday, asshole.” Jeremy leans his head against the piano, riding out the end of his adrenaline spike. “I can’t believe you know Rent but you don’t know Beethoven. Jesus.”

“I like modern music. Rent’s like, a hundred years newer than your crusty dead piano guys.”

“Whatever. Talk to me when you compose something as iconic as Beethoven’s fifth.”

“I literally have no idea what any of those words mean.”

Jeremy elbows Michael in the side. “Fuck off. Why are we meeting in a practice room to compose?”

Michael elbows him back. “Because I can’t read music, Heere. I gotta noodle around on my bass to come up with new stuff. I can’t just write stuff down and make it sound good.”

“Yeah? So pick your bass up, Mell. Stop bothering me. The piano’s my territory.” Jeremy playfully pushes Michael off the bench, running a major arpeggio up the keys.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m going.” Michael pulls his bass out, plugging into an amp and fiddling around a little on the strings. As he sets up, Jeremy plays a soft, uncertain pair of chords.

“I was thinking we could do something a little, I dunno, French? I’m really feeling a Debussy kind of vibe. Like, maybe we take this chord, and then take a step up and invert it so you get a seventh kind of feel? And we can build from there, but—”

Michael interrupts him with a staccato beat. “Jeremy, I love and respect your taste in music, but that sounds boring as hell. Why don’t we write something fun?” He slides his hand up the bass’s neck and plucks a deep note, waiting for a beat before he launches into a steamy, deep funk solo. He’s gone from plucking the strings to slapping a heavy, dirty swinging beat, and to Jeremy, it sounds like pure sex. Jeremy can feel the lowest notes vibrating in the base of his spine, liquidizing his brain, and then Michael angles his wrist, biting his lip, and slides into a filthy offkey augmented chord that, despite all musical theory, actually manages to work in the progression. Jeremy’s temperature is starting to skyrocket, so he hurriedly picks the most dissonant chord he can think of and mashes it loudly, interrupting Michael’s groove.

“As interesting as that was, I’m gonna go ahead and say no. I can’t fit a piano piece around something like that. It’s too…” Distractingly sexy, Jeremy thinks, but settles for saying, “…complex.”

Michael looks put out. “So what do you suggest?”

Jeremy plays a mellow ninth, focusing intensely on the idea of a cold shower. “I dunno. A compromise? Something we both like. Elements of funk and classical.”

“So… jazz?” Michael smiles, cocky.

Jeremy shakes his head, plunking a dissatisfied low F. “Shut up and give me a chord to start with.”

“How about this one?” Michael strums something melancholy. Jeremy thinks it sounds like a G7, but he isn’t sure. “Which chord is that? You can’t just…play it. I’m good at playing by ear, but I can’t transcribe like that.”

“I dunno. I don’t know the notes. I just know it sounds like…this.” Michael strums the chord again, a little helplessly.

“You’re hopeless.” Jeremy stands up from the piano. “Hand me the bass.”
Michael takes a step back, holding his bass against his chest protectively. “Why?”

“Because I can’t figure out what chords you’re playing from this angle. Just trust me.”

Michael hesitates for a second, before he nods and ducks out of the guitar’s shoulder strap. Jeremy steps forward and takes the bass, feeling the solid weight of the guitar settle onto his shoulders. Michael sits down on the piano bench, facing Jeremy, eyes wide. He’s staring at Jeremy a little too intensely for comfort.


“No. You just look really…” Michael stops, shaking his head a little.

“Really what?” Jeremy presses, plucking a low note experimentally.

“Nothing. Nevermind. I’m just saying things.”

Jeremy rolls his eyes. Michael and Rich are both such talented speakers, they’d be a perfect match—and curse his overactive imagination, because he’s hit by a vivid picture of Michael and Rich holding hands, laughing in the courtyard outside of the music department, and feels unexpectedly bitter. He quickly dismisses the feeling and runs a scale up the bass. The lack of frets is throwing him off a little, but he’s getting used to it. “What chord did you want to start on?”

Michael points vaguely at the bass’s neck. “That one.”

“Jesus, Michael, which fucking chord? Show me on the strings.”

“Uhh...okay, bar the bottom two, and then go a half step up--”

“Half step up from where? Michael, there’s no frets--”

“From the barred strings--”

“But where do I bar?”

“Right there,” Michael points emphatically, “where I’m pointing, no, go up--”

“Up? Notes-wise or direction wise?”

“Both?”

“That isn’t possible on a bass, Michael--”

“Well, it’s possible for me--”

“I promise it isn’t--”

“It is if you’re me--”

“No it isn’t, now tell me what notes--”

“Jesus fuck!” Michael stands up abruptly and grabs Jeremy’s shoulders. He spins him around and presses his torso firmly against Jeremy’s back.

“Michael, what--”

“This fucking chord, Jeremy.” Michael rests his chin on Jeremy’s shoulder, placing his hand over
Jeremy’s on the bass’s neck. “Match my fingers.” And then his other hand settles on Jeremy’s waist, and a chill rocks up Jeremy’s spine. He must be more touch-starved than he thought. He can barely focus on the chord Michael’s trying to show him, because all of his attention is trained on the soft breath he can feel brushing against his neck.

“I-I-I, okay, I, uh…” Jeremy tries desperately to keep his chill. “It’s, uh, it’s a suspended D. The chord, I mean.”

“Awesome. You remember that, ’cause it means nothing to me.” Michael drops his voice lower. “Now how about this chord?” He shifts his hand, and Jeremy follows his lead. He strums the chord, and follows Michael’s lead into a third and lets out a gentle “oh” because Michael’s manipulating the melody into something slightly minor. It sounds like heartache, something so painfully lonely that Jeremy instinctively presses closer to Michael, adding a soft vibrato, and it seems to break the spell, because Michael laughs and breaks the chord off. “Nice touch.”

“I think that progression is a great start. I gotta write it down before I forget.” They stand in place for a second longer. Jeremy’s not sure why, but he feels safe with Michael pressed up against him.

“You do that.” They stay standing, frozen. Michael’s hair is tickling Jeremy’s neck. “Jeremy, can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Jeremy breathes, feeling suddenly uncertain.

Michael lets out a breath, raising goosebumps down Jeremy’s spine. “Are you gonna go to Jake’s party?”

Jeremy doesn’t know what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn’t that. He starts to respond, but is interrupted by the practice door slamming open.

“Michael? Where’s--Jeremy?!”

Michael jerks backward at the speed of light. Jeremy turns around, embarrassed (of what, he doesn’t know), to find Rich and Jake standing in the door of the practice room. He should really remember to lock the door when he’s trying to rehearse. Jake looks pissed off, and Rich just looks scandalized.

Jeremy fumbles for words, finally settling on, “I swear it’s not what it looks like!”

“I was just showing him a chord!”

“Because he can’t read music--”

“And, Jeremy’s working on the composition--”

Rich waves their frantic explanations off. “Why the hell is Jeremy wearing your bass? You don’t even let me touch the bass. And I’ve known you for years.”

“Oh, uh…” Jeremy searches desperately for an explanation, because he doesn’t want to ruin Michael’s chances with Rich because of a little misunderstanding, even though he didn’t really know why Michael let him play his bass either, but fuck it, it’s not important right now, because, “It wasn’t his idea. I made him. So I could figure out the chord?”

Rich raises an eyebrow. “Honey, Michael has well over fifty pounds on you. I don’t think you could force him to do a single thing he didn’t want to do.”

Jake crosses his arms. “But the opposite is entirely possible. Jeremy, is Mell creeping on you?”
“Hey!” Michael protests, blushing pink.

“No creeping! We’re totally fine!”

“Or,” Rich says slowly, “did we just interrupt something? Because we can, like, leave~”

“No! No, God no, Rich, Michael is so not interested in me like that, and,” Jeremy panics and lies through his teeth, “I’m like, a hundred percent straight. I’m no threat to you two. At all. I promise. And even if I wasn’t, like, so so hetero, I wouldn’t be after Michael, he’s not…” Jeremy lies again, blatantly, “he’s not my type.” A couple lies aren’t too big of a deal if it can save a relationship, right? Michael deserves to be happy, and if he’s going to be happy with Rich, Jeremy wants to help. Even if something in Jeremy twists painfully at the idea.


“Nobody. Nothing. Look, I’m just tired. And hungover. I think I’m gonna go home and sleep it off, alright? See you guys at the party tomorrow.” He hands Michael his bass and quickly pushes past Rich and Jake into the hall, ignoring the chill that races up his spine as he bumps into Jake’s solid chest. He needs some time to sit down and figure out what the fuck is going on in his head.

Chapter End Notes

:^)

....yell at me in the comments or on tumblr at coloredpencilroses!! i've really been blown away by the amount of support this story has gotten, it means so so much to me that y'all like it!!! see ya in the next update!
Jeremy skids into an abandoned stairwell, ignoring the mixed calls of “Heere?” and “Jeremy!” ringing out behind him. He takes the stairs two at a time, the old music building around him suddenly feeling suffocatingly dark. Finally reaching the ground floor, he slams through the double doors and outside into the sun. His head pounds, the blinding light not doing his hangover any favors. He shades his eyes and glances back at the silent music building; he thinks he can make out three faces watching him from the fourth story. He gives them a falsely reassuring wave and heads off in the direction of his dorm.

As he walks, he mentally kicks himself for saying he was “a hundred percent straight.” He doesn’t even know why he thought he needed to lie about that. He’s always had trouble pinning a label on his sexuality, initially labelling himself as just ‘flexible.’ Eventually ‘flexible’ evolved into ‘probably bisexual’ into ‘maybe gay?’ and then to ‘holy shit I love girls’ after a brief fling with a cute blonde named Brooke his freshman year, and then right back to ‘yeah, probably bi’ after they broke up. He probably shouldn’t have lied about such a huge part of his identity to his new friends, but he’ll deal with that later. For now, he’s got more pressing problems.

Problems like why the hell can’t he handle his emotions around Michael? Why does the idea of Rich and Michael together drive him up the wall? And why does looking at Jake make him lightheaded? He’s going crazy, he’s gotta be, otherwise--

Jeremy, overwhelmed, stumbles over a loose piece of cement on the sidewalk. Jesus, okay, one thing at a time. He carefully lets his mind go blank before settling on...Jake. Jake Dillinger. He’s really, really, really hot, Jeremy’s undeniably attracted to him, and he could be wrong, because Jeremy’s never been very good at reading these sorts of things, but he thinks Jake’s attracted to him too? He had complimented him, and been really physical. Touchy? Jeremy can’t think of the right word. Maybe that’s just the way friends act with each other. Jeremy’s never really had any of those before, so he doesn’t have anything to compare Jake to. Except Michael, now, and yeah, he’s a new friend, but... Jeremy stops, making a mental Venn diagram of Jake and Michael’s behavior. Overly physical? Check, check. Openly compliments Jeremy? Check, check. Weirdly protective? Check and check.

He pauses, thinking. The only logical conclusion is that he must be reading into the Jake thing too much; Michael does all the things Jake does, only Michael likes Rich, not Jeremy. Another stab of bitterness hits him low in the chest, and seriously Jeremy, what the fuck, he should be happy for his friend having a crush, not weirdly jealous. Yeah, Michael is hot, and yeah, he’s absolutely Jeremy’s type, but that’s all. Pure physical attraction.

No feelings involved.

Although, theoretically, if Jeremy had a crush on Michael, it would certainly explain some things. Like why Jeremy’s insides go all gooey and soft when Michael laughs. Or why he turns into a blushing mess whenever he’s in the same room as Michael. Or why he had agreed to go to dinner with Michael for no real reason, and got weirdly cuddly with him when he was tipsy. Or...Oh no, no fucking way. No. Fucking. Way. Goddamn it. Jeremy feels his point of view flip 180 degrees.

In retrospect, maybe Jeremy does have a tiny little totally massive crush. But it’s completely understandable, because Michael’s tall, and handsome, and suave, and funny, and-- totally not into
you,” Jeremy reminds himself harshly. Michael’s into Rich. Jeremy would be lying if he said the thought didn’t make his heart twist painfully. But he doesn’t want to risk stepping on any toes; pursuing a stupid crush isn’t worth ruining his only two friendships.

Jeremy is pulled out of his thoughts when he realizes he’s walked all the way to his dorm. He unlocks the room and wanders inside thoughtfully. Michael may not be interested in him, but Jake just might be. He just gets the feeling that maybe he isn’t reading into it too much, and he might actually have a chance with Jake. Jake, who’s incomparably hot, who plans parties for frats, who called Jeremy good-looking. Jake, who really might like Jeremy. And, after all, Jeremy reasons, the best way to get over somebody is to get with somebody new, right? Right. Probably. He shuffles over to his nightstand and finds a bottle of ibuprofen, swallowing a few with a swig of water. He hopes his headache eases off by the time he gets to Jazz and Improv; he really can’t afford to miss another class when half the grade is attendance.

He wanders into class with about a minute to spare, and almost leaves the room, assuming he’s got the wrong place, because Studio Six looks entirely different than it had two days ago. The curtains covering the windows have been thrown open, letting the soft afternoon light filter in. The hardwood floors are freshly polished and black chairs sit in neat rows facing a music stand. A deep red and gold drum set is set up by the windows, and a glistening black upright piano sits beside a pair of amps. Jeremy sets his bag next to the piano and runs a tentative hand over the piano’s cover. It feels cold and uninviting, and he shivers a little. He can’t believe he’s being intimidated by a piano.

He gingerly sits down on the bench, peeking over the front of the piano to observe the rest of the class. Rich is talking to someone he doesn’t recognize in the trumpet section, twirling his drumsticks absentmindedly. He spots a few girls from his music theory class in the saxophone section, both prepping reeds. Jeremy’s palms start to sweat. The syllabus had said they wouldn’t be playing anything for several weeks, so why did everyone have their instruments out? Jeremy’s debating sneaking out of the room before anyone notices him when he’s startled by a loud feedback loop. He snaps his attention to his right, where Michael has appeared, cussing at an amp.

Damn. Jeremy isn’t prepared to deal with Michael right now, not so soon after realizing he’s got a crush, and he ducks his head awkwardly. What are you supposed say to the object of your unrequited affection? Jeremy wishes he had a handbook for this sort of thing. He could just flip to page 80 and find a step by step guide on dealing with your platonic friend who you’re kind of maybe totally infatuated with, and all his problems would be solved. Acutely aware that he’s already starting to blush from the sight of Michael alone, Jeremy clears his throat. “Everything alright, man?”

Michael jumps, knocking into the amp and causing another round of feedback. “Shit! Jeremy! I didn’t see you come in—” He cuts off, searching Jeremy’s face. “Are you okay? We were all really worried about you. I thought you’d still be at home, sleeping or something. You were acting kinda...weird earlier.” His expression is neutral, but Jeremy can see a flicker of sadness in his eyes. Or maybe regret? Something clearly negative, though Jeremy can’t figure out what or why. Maybe Michael’s just freaked out by of all of Jeremy’s weirdness? It’d make sense; Michael’s used to being around cool people like Jake. And Rich. Jeremy’s probably nothing more than annoying baggage to him.

Jeremy feels his eyes start to water and quickly responds to Michael with an unconvincing, “I’m fine, just needed some ibuprofen. All good now.” He shoots a thumbs-up off to his right, but focuses on the piano in front of him. Being so close to Michael is making him flustered and uncomfortable, but he hopes he’s hiding it alright. All Jeremy has to do is act normal until his feelings die off. Easy.

Jeremy can see Michael stepping closer out of the corner of his eye. “Are you sure? You look really flushed, here,” and then Michael reaches over and rests his hand on Jeremy’s forehead.
Michael’s gentle touch radiates warmth, briefly soothing the remainder of his headache, and it feels comforting and stupidly nice and so, so domestic. Jeremy feels himself automatically relax into the touch. He can imagine Michael checking up on him like this when he’s sick, or hungover, or even if he’s just sleepy; Michael’s that kind of a person. He’d probably sit on the edge of Jeremy’s bed and wake him softly, golden early morning light trickling through their half-closed blinds, washing over Michael in a bronze glow. He’d lean over Jeremy, a little concerned, cupping his chin and pressing a kiss to his forehead, the picture of an overprotective boyfriend. Maybe he’d say something cheesy like, “Hey there, sleeping beauty,” and Jeremy would pretend to cringe, but really on the inside he’d be melting, and Michael would lean down and kiss his frown away, laughing, and-- the impossible image makes Jeremy’s chest ache sharply. He can’t keep falling like this. Not for someone who’s in love with someone else.

Jeremy abruptly turns his head away, out of Michael’s reach. “Don’t touch me.”

His heartache must have made him sound a lot harsher than he intended, because Michael immediately backs off, shocked.

“Oh, fuck, man, I’m sorry, I didn’t...I didn’t mean to--I’m not--”

He’s interrupted by Professor Reyes clanging a drumstick against a cowbell, silencing the class.

“Good afternoon, everyone! I don’t want to waste any time, so we’re going to be picking up right where we left off yesterday, hopefully we won’t be sightreading this time around-- yes, Rich, put your hand down, I’ll pass out the charts--”

Reyes shuffles through a stack of papers before tossing a few at the first chair saxophonist. “Jenna, be a dear and figure out whose parts are whose, I don’t have the time to sort them, thank you, now where’s Jake? Has anyone seen Jake?” A few trombonists in the second row shuffle around and point backward to where Jake is standing in the trumpet section. “Jake, you’re gonna need a mute, prep it while I talk to the rhythm section, alright,” and then he tosses another stack of papers to the lead trombonist and scurries towards the back of the room where Jeremy, Michael, Rich, and a guitarist Jeremy doesn’t recognize are set up.

“Alright, Mell, I know I’m probably asking for a miracle, but can you at least try and pretend to use the music this time around? Please?”


The guitarist rolls her eyes. Rich plays an amused drag-tap on his snare.

“That’s better than a no.” Reyes makes his way over to Jeremy, setting sheet music down in front of him. “And you! Mr. Mystery Pianist, we meet at last. Michael said you were sick? It doesn’t matter why you were gone as long as you’re prepared to play.”

Jeremy drums his fingers nervously on the piano’s cover. “I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all I want from you. We’re looking at doing a small ensemble ballad for our winter concert, right now I’m leaning towards this quartet, if we can pull it off-- I know you’ll be sightreading, so I get it if you screw up, but fair warning, it’s just going to be you and Jake playing at the beginning,” he gestures to Jake, who shoots Jeremy a friendly wink, “and then Rich and Mell are gonna be adding a little structure to the background, nothing flashy, so no pressure, but you’re gonna be pretty exposed in the front half, okay?” He whirls away towards the front of the classroom before Jeremy has a chance to respond.

He folds the piano’s cover back and rolls up the protective layer of velvet resting on the keys, fighting to stay calm. He plays a quick chromatic to warm his fingers up, merging smoothly into a few chords he picks at random. Michael tunes up with the guitarist beside him, his back resolutely turned to Jeremy. Jeremy wants to apologize for snapping at him, but he’s pretty sure the damage has already been done. He’s brainstorming ways he can make it up to Michael later when he’s distracted by a few calls of “Damn, Jakey-D” and appreciative whistles from the rest of the band as Jake uncases an absolutely gorgeous trumpet.

It shines with a red-gold luster, a deep bronze that stands out drastically against the rest of the section’s standard silver-gold instruments. It almost looks small in Jake’s strong hands. He brushes off the band’s compliments as he twists his mouthpiece into place with practiced ease. He starts to raise it to his face before pausing to glance towards Jeremy, who is probably staring like an idiot. Time slows for a brief moment as Jake holds his gaze, smiling smugly, and then, god damn, what the hell, he wets his lips seductively, still staring Jeremy down. Jeremy feels himself go a little lightheaded as time returns to its regular speed and Jake turns away to run a few scales.

He doesn’t know a whole lot about friendship, but he’s pretty certain that platonic friends don’t do...that. He files the thought away to consider later. For now, he has to focus on jazz. He tugs curiously at the sheet music in front of him, searching for a first page. The music doesn’t look too difficult, it’s an easy key at least, and--there-- the song’s titled “Moon Love,” and it’s a tune Jeremy already knows well. He shuffles the chart into the correct order and taps the sostenuto pedal anxiously, waiting for Reyes, who has returned to his stand at the front, to count them off.

“Is everyone set? Rich, do you have brushes? You are not playing a ballad with snare sticks this time, alright? No repeats of last year.” He levels a stern glare at Rich and Michael snickers fondly. Jeremy ignores the slight tug of jealousy in his chest and focuses on the music in front of him. He can hear his heart beating in his ears.

“Alright, piano man, you’ve got four bars solo intro. Ready?”

Jeremy places a shaky hand on the keys. “Sure.”

“Okay.” Reyes raises a hand, giving him a prep beat. “One...two...one, two, ready, go.”

Jeremy stumbles over the first chord. And the second. He takes a moment to try and find the beat again, and falls back in on the second measure. He gets the right notes this time, but can tell he’s playing stiff by the way Jake turns to look at him, confused. A few more trumpets turn around, too, and the unwanted attention makes Jeremy miss a chord change. He cringes as he catches up, fading into a simple chord comp accompaniment. Maybe not the worst solo he’s ever played, but it certainly wasn’t great. At least the scary part is behind him. Now he just gets to sit back and meld with the rest of the rhythm section, letting Jake take the lead. He flicks his hand up an octave and plays a grace note, cueing Jake’s entrance.

Jake snaps his trumpet up to parallel, a flashy, eccentric marching band move that contrasts immediately and drastically with the deep, mellow, seductive tone of his solo. He pulls Jeremy’s tempo into a sharp nosedive, lingering on a note before slurring low into his range, adding a sultry vibrato growl. He stays there for longer than the music calls for, trailing off as he runs out of breath. Jeremy waits to push into the next measure, listening for Jake’s melody to resurface. After the silence stretches on for a touch too long, he glances up over the piano just in time to catch Jake’s eye. Jake winks again, this time a little mischievously, and plunges into the next phrase, pushing the tempo into an upbeat shuffle that is definitely not written into the music. Rich chooses that moment to drop in with a soft flam-tap that merges into a slow swing, playfully reigning in Jake’s improvised
Jeremy clings to the structure of the drums, sticking carefully to the backbeat of the music. He feels more comfortable with a concrete tempo; he just can’t get a read on Jake’s style yet. Jake seems to sense Jeremy’s hesitance through his stiff backing chords and raises a questioning eyebrow, a smug, self-important sort of expression that screams, “Is that all you’ve got?” Jake reaches the end of a phrase, adding a flirtatious fall that Jeremy knows isn’t in the music, and Jeremy thinks so that’s how it’s gonna be and loosens up, adding an innocent little trill to his accompaniment. Jake smiles, recognizing the improvisation, and rolls his shoulders, prepping for the next section--

Jeremy takes off, snatching the solo out from under him, running a pentatonic scale up into an inverted sixth, comping chords in his left hand and improvising a coy, biting melody on his right. He snaps the tempo up and out of the realm of a ballad, forcing Rich into a brisk affrettando, struggling to keep time with his brush sticks. A thrill of adrenaline settles high and buzzy in his head. Jeremy has no idea what the hell he’s doing, he’s playing totally off book, but something about Jake’s flirty little improvisation made him want to show off. His hands are flying across the keys, making sure he doesn’t leave any room for Jake to steal back into the spotlight. He can feel Rich trying to reel him back in, playing towards the backbeat, politely suggesting a slower tempo, but Jeremy keeps pushing until Rich gives in and loosens up too, grinning, flipping his brushes so he’s playing with the handles, turning the ballad beat into a quick shuffle.

Jake laughs once, bright and golden, and it distracts Jeremy for long enough that Jake manages to slip back into the solo line. He plays a brash, wavering high note, followed with several staccato hits, his previously dark tone brightening up into something showy and romantic. He plays a few falls in quick succession before Jeremy jumps back into the solo with a glitzy big band melody that sounds like, “I wasn’t done yet,” and Jake layers over him with a playful “So what? You interrupted me first,” drawing out a teasing quarter triplet. Jeremy feels like he’s dancing, trading phrases fluidly with Jake, locked into the quick ebb and flow of the music. It feels flirty and light and fun and, yeah, he’s pretty sure platonic friends don’t do this.

Jeremy grins at Jake over the piano. He glissandos up the keyboard, a dazzling, glittering arc of champagne, making sure Jake can read his amused but exasperated “Fuck you.” Jake squares his shoulders and hits a clear, sharp high note that sounds very much like “If you insist,” and then Michael makes his entrance and the music sounds wrongwrongwrong.

If soloing with Jake felt like a dance, Michael’s entrance makes the song into a warzone. He plays a harsh sixteenth note run and shifts the key a half step down, forcing Jeremy and Jake to pause and adjust while he solos a riff. It’s jazzy and minor and exaggeratedly technical, full of bent notes and jumps. Michael’s standing in a shallow lunge, his head bent low over his bass, shoulders a rigid line beneath his sweater, postured like a metal bassist. He sounds like a metal bassist, too, improvising on an angsty, defensive theme.

Once Jeremy recovers from his initial shock and figures out what key Michael’s fallen into, he slams a loud suspended chord that rings major before Michael shifts the key again, this time into something so full of accidentals and double flats that Jeremy has to pause and actually count up the scale on his hands, something he hasn’t done since first grade, and by the time he figures out it was a variation on a locrian scale, Michael has shifted again and this time Jeremy can’t find a key because Michael isn’t using one. He’s just playing a mess of distorted, muddy notes, so far from his usual clean, melodic style that Jeremy can’t believe the music is coming from him. It sounds like Michael’s trying to put too much into the song, his emotions overwhelming the medium, falling twisted and half-broken into the rapidly deteriorating riff Michael’s tearing out. Feedback bleeds out of the amp, starting from a quiet whine and building to a shrill screech that has half the band dropping their instruments to cover their ears.
Michael rips the guitar’s cable out mid-note, causing a loud pop of static, and the room falls silent. He stands, head down, with a hand curled tightly above his heart into the fabric of his hoodie. His shoulders rise and fall erratically, his chest heaving. He looks like he’s been fatally wounded.

Jeremy risks a glance around the classroom for the first time since the song started, and realizes everyone’s staring at him in silent shock. His eyes meet Jake’s, and Jake looks ecstatic, and a little shocked too. His cheeks are dusted pink and he’s smiling widely, running a hand backwards through his dark styled hair. A beat passes, and everyone starts to talk at once.

“Jeremy, that was--!”

“Jake, I didn’t know you could--”

“Yo, who’s that piano kid?"

“Plays like a beast.”

“Went Art Tatum on that fuckin’ solo.”

“I think he’s in my music theory class--”

“Yeah, hangover kid, that’s right--”

Jeremy tunes them out. He looks hard at Michael, trying to figure out exactly what went wrong with his solo. He takes his bass off, leaning it carefully against his amp, and lets his arms fall limply to his sides. He’s got his back turned to Jeremy again, facing Rich’s direction, so he can’t get a read on Michael’s expression, but Rich must see something concerning in his face because he quickly drops his sticks and makes his way over to Michael.

“Jeremy can’t hear what, exactly, but Rich says something to Michael, voice pitched low, serious expression looking out of place on his boyish face. He rests his hands on Michael’s shoulders, steadying the taller man, studying his face intensely. Rich nods as Michael responds, gesturing halfheartedly towards the rest of the band with a tilt of his head, and Rich smiles, a little sadly, still nodding, and holds his arms out. Michael tilts forward with no hesitation, obscuring Rich entirely in a suffocating hug.

Jeremy watches as Rich rubs soothing circles into Michael’s shoulders, smoothing out the bunched fabric of his sweatshirt. After what feels like an eternity to Jeremy, Michael stands back and reaches up to his face, pulling off his glasses. He turns back to face the front of the room, and Jeremy quickly looks away, because, fuck, Michael’s eyes are glassy, he was crying, why was he crying, was it Jeremy’s fault? It had to be, why else would-- but then he sees Rich reach over and punch Michael on the shoulder, and then Michael laughs, brightening up slightly, and Jeremy feels himself get jealous all over again. Rich is perfect for Michael. Their chemistry is unbelievable. He stares longingly, only turning away when he realizes Reyes has been hitting a cowbell for the last few minutes, trying to reign the class in.

“Everyone! Hello? Am I invisible? C’mon! Everyone, just shut up!”

The class finally quiets down, turning expectantly towards Reyes.

“Okay. First of all,” he sets the cowbell down, “piano kid. What’s your name?”

“Uh...I’m Jeremy?” Jeremy feels his voice inflect upwards, turning his name into a question.

“Alright. You’re maybe the best pianist I’ve ever had in my class, so. Thanks for that.”
Jeremy’s mouth falls open reflexively. Jeremy? The best? He finds it a little hard to believe, but Jake is nodding emphatically, eyebrows raised, and he looks impressed, so maybe Jeremy’s better than he thinks he is.

Reyes continues on, “And we all know Dillinger is good, but Jake, I’ve never heard you play like that before, your tone was incredible--” Jake smiles appreciatively, ”--and how were you guys so in sync? It’s like Jeremy was forcing you to play better, I’m really, truly shocked.” He stops. “And speaking of shock. Michael, what happened?”

Michael shrugs, casual. “Equipment failure.”

Reyes inclines his head doubtfully, but must see something in Michael’s face that warns him not to push the issue. “Okay. I’ll look at the amp after class.” He crosses his arms and eyes Jeremy sternly.

“No, the second thing. That was definitely not a ballad.”

The class laughs, and Jeremy hunches over, embarrassed.

“My bad, Professor,” Jake calls from the trumpet line. “I pushed the tempo.”

“And Mr. Jeremy ran away with it.”

“Fair, but Michael’s the one who turned it into death metal.”

Michael shakes his head. “It was experimental jazz.”

“So why did you have the fuckin’ power stance, man? You looked like a bad James Hetfield wannabe.” Jake smiles, teasing.

“Yeah? You’re a sad Chet Baker fanboy.” Michael’s voice is sharp.

“Whoa.” Jake grins, a little forced. “Chill, Michael, I was joking.”

“I wasn’t. It’s like you memorize all his transcriptions and mimic them instead of making your own solos,” and Michael’s tone is light but his fists are clenched at his sides.

Jeremy sees a muscle in Jake’s jaw jump. “At least I can read transcriptions.”

“What.” Michael says, and it isn’t a question, it’s a low growl.

“I said, at least I can read music--”

Reyes forces a laugh and interrupts, “Hey, guys, let’s all simmer down, alright? How about we take the rest of the hour off. We’ve all had plenty of jazz experience for the day.”

Michael nods and backs off. Jake sends a confused glare at his back before he wanders over to Jeremy, trumpet in hand.

“Yo, Jeremy, can you believe Mell? What the fuck was that about?”

Jeremy shrugs. “I honestly don’t know. I kinda snapped at him earlier, though. Maybe I put him on edge.”

“Nah, man. I’ve known Michael for a few years and I’ve never seen him get that worked up over anything. He’s usually just a go-with-the-flow type of guy. Don’t blame yourself.” Jake reaches out and brushes a strand of hair out of Jeremy’s face. “Nice playing, by the way.”
“Oh! Uh, thanks, yeah. I kind of took off in the middle there. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was awesome.”

“Heh.”

Jeremy’s just stumbled onto a major roadblock in his plan for getting over Michael—no, his plan for getting with Jake, destroying his Michael-crush just happens to be an extra bonus— he has no clue how to talk to Jake. When he’s with Michael, the conversation seems to just happen. There’s never any awkward pauses, or uncomfortable silences, because there’s always something Michael’s excited to talk about, or a question Jeremy has, or a back-and-forth of well-intentioned bickering to play out. Michael’s cool, and handsome, and it should be intimidating, but he’s so warm and genuine that Jeremy just feels at home.

With Jake, Jeremy feels less secure. He knows Jake is a nice guy, but he can’t get past the feeling that everything Jake does is a little too smooth, like he’s constantly trying to do what other people expect him to. He’s too polished. Jake is suave, sure, and he has a good heart, but he feels just a little...dishonest. Then Jeremy realizes it’s pointless to compare Jake to Michael because Michael’s, well, Michael. Warm and positive and a great cook and so, so into Rich. Jeremy’s heart drops as he reminds himself that Michael will never be interested in him, especially not after he snapped at him, and passed out on him, and drank all of his wine, and, oh God, Michael deserves so much better than Jeremy can give him anyway. If Jeremy has to settle for--no, that’s not right, if he has to go out with Jake so he can get over his stupid infatuation and let Michael be happy, then so be it.

“Jeremy? Earth to Heere, you in there?”

Jeremy blinks, realizing Jake’s been trying to get his attention.

“Yeah?”

“Man, you were spaced out. I asked if you still wanted to go to my party tomorrow?”

Jeremy glances to his right, where Michael’s leaning against a window, absentmindedly running scales on his unplugged bass. The afternoon light is warm and golden, giving Michael a dazzling silhouette. Jeremy takes one last long look at him, drinking in as much detail as he can, from his old, torn up sneakers to his red jacket. He lets his eyes trace Michael’s broad shoulders, up the long line of his neck, and settles on his face. Michael looks peaceful, eyes closed, head tilted down, focused entirely on his music. Between the golden lighting and the bass in his hands, he kind of looks like Apollo. The thought makes Jeremy smile, even though he feels like his heart is being squeezed into a pulp. He focuses hard on burning the image of Michael leaning against the window into his mind, haloed in warm light, bass in hand, ratty sneakers on, stupid headphones around his neck, wearing a peaceful smile, totally in love with Rich.

Jeremy turns back to Jake, his mind made up.

“I wouldn't miss your party for the world.”
i had a lot of fun writing the music this chapter it was nice!
i'll see y'all in the next update,,, yell at me in the comments or stop over at
coloredpencilroses on tumblr.com!!! i love to talk abt this story, feel free to come and
say hi!!!

and i didn't link Moon Love in this bc Jake and Jeremy basically Totally Ignore the
music so it seemed pointless to put it in tbh
Jeremy gets back to his dorm around four and breaks out his keyboard, a few sheets of blank grand staves and a pencil, wanting to get to work on his composition project as soon as possible. He’s been meaning to buy a new keyboard, one with MIDI input so he doesn’t have to transcribe by hand, but he unfortunately doesn’t have several thousand dollars just laying around to blow on a nicer piano. And even if he did have the money, he’d probably use it to rent an apartment. Roommate or no, he’s tired of living in a tiny, shitty dorm.

Jeremy pulls on a pair of oversized headphones, ignoring the fact that they remind him of Michael. He boots up his keyboard and lets his hands find the chord Michael had picked. It sounds a little tense, but not particularly minor, and Jeremy can’t figure out why until he realizes it’s a suspended chord, it’ll sound minor or major depending on context, and he has to play other chords to flesh out the progression. But that doesn’t explain how Michael was able to communicate so much emotion with the suspended chord alone. Really, if he’s sticking to the fundamentals of music theory, Michael shouldn’t have been able to get anything across in one chord at all, but Jeremy gets the feeling that maybe music theory doesn’t necessarily apply to Michael.

Jeremy presses the keys down a little more firmly, testing, trying to squeeze some form of emotion out of the stationary chord, and isn’t surprised when the keyboard doesn’t respond. Pressure sensitive pianos are only for people with money, and the ability to transcend the laws of music is only for Michael.

He slouches comfortably and rolls smoothly into the next set of chords they had chosen earlier that afternoon, content to explore the building blocks of the song a few times over before messing with a melody. In context, the suspended chord lends a subtly wrenching, lovesick texture to the progression, a little stab to the heart each time Jeremy circles back to it. He’s still missing the magic and depth that Michael’s bass had provided, but he’s playing smoothly by himself for once, and can’t deny he’s feeling pretty good about it. Even if he’s only playing a set of chords over and over.

Once he feels like he’s got the chords down, he shifts the accompaniment to his left hand and lets his right run up the keys, playing an inexpressive scale in-key, and then hits a boring minor chord an octave up. He’s waiting for the shock of inspiration that hit him in his duet with Jake to reappear, but he’s drawing a blank. He has the technical skill for improvisation, he knows that now, but he can’t seem to force himself into the right mood to play.

He closes eyes, trying to picture some piece of scenery to inspire his playing. It’s a trick he learned back in high school; if he’s struggling with a piece, he’d just google some pretty pictures of forests or snowfields and try and play what he saw. Like painting, but for music. It’d never produced anything groundbreaking for him, but it always helps pull him out of a rut. Now, though, he’s truly hit a wall, because all he can see when he closes his eyes is Michael, bent painfully over his guitar, shoulders tense and shaking. He looked like he’d been stabbed, maybe, or had his heart ripped out, and Jeremy
hadn’t even asked if he was okay. Some friend he was.

Jeremy winces, a pang of guilt pushing hard into his stomach. His hands stumble over the keys and he stops, frustrated. He was planning on trying to distance himself from Michael, just a bit, until he gets over his crush, but he supposes he can start once he apologizes for yelling and makes sure Michael isn’t actually, like, dying or something. And he isn’t going to get any work done if he spends the whole night worried, so checking up on Michael is for sure a win-win. Definitely. He unplugs his headphones decisively and pulls out his phone, tapping out a message to Michael over twitter. He can’t think of anything original or creative to say, so he settles for a simple:

--hey michael, it’s jeremy

A few seconds pass with no response. Jeremy props his phone up on his keyboard, mindlessly repeating the progression he’s been working with. A couple more minutes go by uneventfully and Jeremy’s just about to give up on both Michael and the music when the ‘read’ notification pops up onscreen.

Michael is typing…
--hi,...?

Jeremy hurriedly picks up his phone, but Michael’s already typing out another message.
Michael is typing…
--my hands are pretty full can u call me?
Attached Screenshot: Mell_contactinfo.jpg

Jeremy ignores the electric burst of a hot guy just gave me his number, holy God, I’m never gonna get over him that settles in his chest and quickly saves Michael’s number. His hands shake as he hits call because he’s really never been good at talking on the phone, it sets off his anxiety too badly, and he debates just hanging up, but then Michael answers and his nervousness falls away.

“Michael speaking, how can I help ya?” His voice is warm and a little scratchy.

Jeremy swallows harshly, words caught in his throat. He manages to stutter out “It’s Jeremy,” and Michael laughs, and Jeremy hates himself for the way the sound melts into his brain and makes him shiver.

“Oh, Jeremy, ’sup?”

“I’m calling to check up? I just...you seemed...upset. Earlier. Like. Sad. Y’know?” Jeremy cringes at his own lack of tact.

Michael goes quiet for a moment, and Jeremy can hear tinny eight-bit music tinkling along in the background. There’s a muted click and the music disappears, followed by the sound of shifting fabric. Michael inhales softly and says, “Yeah. Rough day. Sorry.”

“No! Don’t be sorry! I’m--I should be sorry. I fucked up. I said some shit I didn’t mean.”
“Like what?” and maybe it’s the distortion from the phone, but Michael sounds almost hopeful.

“Like when I yelled at you. I didn’t mean it. I just wanted to make sure you knew. That it wasn’t your fault, or whatever. I was feeling off and snapped. I shouldn’t have.”

“Oh. Gotcha.” Michael says, and he sounds exhausted. “Yeah, I know. Don’t worry ‘bout it, man.” Jeremy hears Michael shift again. “Just one of those days, y’know?”

Jeremy knows. He’s having one of those days, too. He hesitates before he asks, “Do you wanna talk about it?”

Michael is silent. Jeremy immediately regrets asking, he’s supposed to be distancing himself, not getting more involved, what is he doing--

“It’s nothing.” Michael’s voice wavers, and it doesn’t sound like nothing.

“C’mon, man. Your bass solo…it sounded wrecked.” Jeremy pushes a little harder, concerned. “You looked like you were hurt. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but…” Jeremy leaves the “I’m worried about you” unsaid. “It’s stupid. I don’t...you shouldn’t care.” Michael’s voice is quiet, almost inaudible.

“Why wouldn’t I care? We’re friends, right?” and Jeremy hopes he doesn’t sound as unsure as he feels.


Jeremy listens to Michael’s soft, rhythmic breathing, heart sinking. He shouldn’t have asked. He should just politely excuse himself right now, hang up and spare himself the heartache of listening to Michael talk about another boy, but instead he says “Who?” and squeezes his eyes shut. He knows it’s Rich, he’d bet his life on it, but some deeply twisted, masochistic part of him wants to hear Michael say it out loud. Just to see how badly it’ll hurt.

Michael’s breath stutters harshly, and instead of “Rich,” he repeats “Just a guy.”

Jeremy curls up on his chair, resting his head on his knees, holding his phone against his ear like a lifeline. He hates himself for hoping, and hates himself even more for saying “What’s he like?” Michael’s quiet again, for too long his time, and Jeremy thinks maybe he just got hung up on when Michael sighs, lovesick and defeated, “He’s amazing.”
Jeremy says nothing. He just sits, trying to fight off the jealousy and heartache stinging his eyes.

Michael continues, still soft and unsure and unbearably smitten. “It’s like, I’ve always thought the whole ‘love at first sight’ thing is total bullshit. And I still think that. But...this guy,” and Jeremy can almost hear the bittersweet smile on Michael’s face, “he makes me wonder.”

“Wonder about what?” Jeremy keeps his voice carefully expressionless.

“About, like, fate and shit. It’s gonna sound so stupid, but I’ve been thinking about him even since the first time we played together. Played music, I mean. It felt like...melting. Like I didn’t know where I stopped and he began.”

Jeremy pulls his knees in closer to his chest and says, “That doesn’t sound stupid,” because he feels the exact same way about Michael. For one brief moment in their duet, he’d felt for the first time like someone had reached past all his walls and seen the real Jeremy. And Jeremy had seen Michael too, or heard him, and he’d been a blushing, sappy, infatuated mess ever since. He tries for casual indifference and asks “Have you told him?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because…” and Michael laughs a little, but there’s nothing happy about the way he says “because he’s into another guy.”

Jeremy thinks back on every time he’s seen Rich and Michael, Michael and Rich, and they fit together so seamlessly in his head that he can’t imagine anything coming between them, and impulsively says, “You should tell him. I’m sure he feels the same. And honestly...he probably already knows.”

Michael inhales sharply, a soft burst of static rattling down the line. “You--he does? Really?”

Jeremy thinks back on Michael anxiously calling Rich, his angry ‘have an ounce of shame,’ all his goofy, friendly banter, and rolls his eyes. “I mean, yeah. You’re not exactly subtle.” He suddenly remembers Rich saying ‘he’s crazy loyal’ with a fond smile, Rich teasing Michael about being jealous, Rich’s stupid prank, and adds “And neither is he.”

“I just--I don’t--” Michael trails off, lost. “I don’t understand.”

“Just tell him. I think you’ll be surprised.”
“Jeremy, I don’t--are you for real?” and Michael sounds hesitant, but there’s an undercurrent of hope in his voice. “I mean, when? How? Do you want me to--now? Does this count? Or…?”

“Jesus, I don’t know, man, it’s up to you. If it were me, I’d prefer it in person.”

“Yeah! Yeah, of course, face to face, obviously…” Michael pauses distractedly. “When…?”

Jeremy can hear Michael’s disbelieving smile, and it feels like an elephant is standing on his chest, shattering his ribs like they’re made of glass. A few errant shards stick into his heart, and he coughs a little, shocked by the knowledge that heartbreak actually, really, literally hurts. “Well, he’s probably going to Jake’s party tomorrow, so. You could tell him then.”

Michael laughs wonderingly. “You should have told me, man, I really can’t believe...I was so sure, I mean, God, this is embarrassing...Yeah. Yeah, okay, tomorrow. At a college party. Cheesy. But I can live with that. I can live with that.”

And right now, Jeremy would literally rather die than be at a party and watch Michael confess to Rich, but he did promise Jake he’d be there, so he steels his nerves and asks, “I don’t want to, like, intrude or anything, but could you maybe give me a ride? I don’t know where Alpha Delta Phi’s frat house is at.”

Michael answers immediately, exasperated, tripping over his words, “Seriously, Jeremy, I swear to God, of course you can have a ride, why would I--? You don’t even have to ask, I mean, really, after this you think--? Jesus. Jesus, Jeremy. Yes, you can have a ride. I’ll pick you up at ten tomorrow.”

“AM or PM?”

“Fucking--AM, Jeremy, yeah, let’s get wasted at a frat party at ten in the morning on a Saturday. Great idea.”

“Hey, just making sure, dude, God.” Jeremy rolls his eyes again, pained. At least he still has Jake.

“Awesome, okay, fucking--amazing, man, I’ve never been this excited for a frat party before, Jesus-.”

Jeremy cuts him off, his patience starting to run thin. “Yeah. That’s great. Look, I have to go, okay? See you around.” He starts to hang up, but Michael keeps talking and he pauses against his better judgement.

“Wait! Jeremy, dude, one last thing.”
He should hang up. He should definitely hang up.

“Yeah?” Jeremy answers weakly.
He should hang up, but his will power is nonexistent when it comes to Michael.

“You kinda took off after music theory, and I doubt you got any lunch. So just,” and Michael’s voice is still so warm and glowing and besotted that it makes Jeremy a little sick, “just make sure you get something to eat, alright? I don’t need you--”

Jeremy hangs up.

Michael’s last phrase rings in his ears. He knows Michael was probably going to say ‘I don’t need you to pass out again,’ or ‘I don’t need you getting sick,’ but just plain ‘I don’t need you’ seems much more fitting.

Jeremy rests his head on the keyboard, ignoring the grating noise it causes in favor of waiting for the ragged pain ripping through his chest to subside. He’s a mess, a stupid, heartbroken, lovesick mess and he needs to get over it as soon as possible, because if he keeps feeling like this it’s gonna kill him. It’s gonna kill him for sure.

Jeremy spends his Saturday morning wandering around campus anxiously, killing time before he gets ready for the party. When he gets home, he wastes about an hour trying to figure out a preliminary duet melody he can throw out later, but can’t come up with anything that isn’t bitter and discordant. He gives up and showers, combs through his hair, and changes his outfit three times. He finally settles on something appropriately casual for an anticipated night of heavy drinking and is feeling only a little anxious when Michael pulls up in his ugly car a little before ten. The sun has set almost totally below the horizon, casting the sky and Michael’s Crusier in deep fuchsia. Rich is sitting in the front seat of the convertible, but hurriedly unbuckles his seatbelt as Jeremy wanders towards the car.

“Here, man, you want shotgun? I’ll switch back--”

Jeremy waves him off, already reaching for the door to the back seat. “Don’t worry about it, man, you take it.”

Rich starts to climb over the center console, insistent, “Really, dude, I don’t mind, go ahead, the seat’s yours,” and Jeremy pulls him back, equally insistent, “No, c’mon, sit by Michael, don’t move,” and they end up at an awkward standstill for a minute while they both try to offer each other the front seat, until Michael’s patience runs out and he snaps, “Jesus, are you guys, like, toddlers? How about you both get in the backseat, if you’re gonna be weird about it?”

Rich looks at Jeremy and shrugs, sweeping an arm towards the backseat. “After you, bro.”
Jeremy relents and pulls the car door open, catching Michael’s eye for a second before he slides into the backseat. Michael’s rocking a dorky, excited grin, sprawling casually in the driver’s seat. He’s dressed down but still manages to look about a thousand times better than Jeremy, even in just a t-shirt and jeans.

As they take a left out of the lot, Rich leans over, grinning devilishly, and nudges Jeremy in the ribs.

“Hey, Michael’s lookin’ pretty good today, huh? Sun’s out guns out, amiright?”

Jeremy freezes. The last thing he wants to do right now is talk to Michael’s crush about how hot he actually thinks Michael is. He briefly considers vaulting out of the convertible, but luckily Michael intervenes before he has time to respond or throw himself out of the car.

“Rich, I will drive this car off a cliff, I swear to God, stop harassing Jeremy.”

“Hey man, I’m just makin’ sure Jeremy’s appreciating the view. C’mon, Jeremy, on a scale from negative ten to ten, how great are Michael’s biceps, do you think?”

“Jesus, Rich, please, just shut your mouth.” Michael’s tone is terse, but a blush is climbing up the back of his neck.

Jeremy has the sudden, overpowering urge to yell ‘please god stop flirting, I can’t take it anymore,’ but settles instead for staring moodily out the window into the rapidly darkening road, watching street lights flicker past. He tries his hardest to tune out Rich and Michael’s playful banter, focusing hard on exactly how hammered he’s planning on getting later. Nothing like the sweet release of alcohol-induced unconsciousness to wipe away the heartbreak.

It’s only about a five minute drive before they turn onto a side street and Rich laughs, pointing out the window, “Jeez, I wonder which house the party could possibly be in?” and it takes Jeremy less than a second to get what he means, because in the middle of the quiet block is a large, multi-storied house ablaze with colored lights. The faint thumping of electronic music only gets louder as they park and Michael leads them to the door.

They pause briefly on the doorstep. Rich lays a reassuring hand on Jeremy’s shoulder. “Ready for this?”

Jeremy nods, oddly apprehensive. He’s been to parties before, sure, but never frat parties, and never on this apparent scale. He’s just happy to have someone with him, even if he is kind of third wheeling. Michael rings the doorbell a few times and then swings the door open and Jeremy’s faced with a tableau of pure drunken college party chaos.

The entryway is packed with people, dimly lit in teal. Jeremy vaguely recognizes a few kids he’s
seen around campus, but most are totally new faces. Several people are dancing, a few are kissing, and he counts at least four people passed out in various unflattering positions. On a stairway to his right, a petite blonde girl has a tall brunette pinned against the wall, passionately making out. To his left, a thin, tan guy is crying into a potted plant, hysterically trying to convince his obviously mortified friend that he’s “just trying to water the bush, I swear, look, he’s drying out, I’m not crying, you’re crying, shut up K-man, God.”

Jeremy realizes he’s been staring for a little too long. He locates Michael and Rich, who are already about halfway across the room, and apologetically shoves past a hammered hipster with a truly fantastic ginger mustache and an ethereally beautiful dark-skinned woman with platinum silver hair. Actually, now that he’s really looking, almost everyone at the party is ethereally beautiful. Apparently all of Jake’s friends are supermodels? Jeremy’s acutely aware that he’s measurably the least attractive person in the house, and he feels uncomfortably exposed, so he shuffles close to Michael and Rich as they enter the next room. It’s a living room of some sort, a wide open floor plan with tons of couches and chairs and a huge flatscreen TV covering one wall. The music’s a little quieter in here, and Jeremy’s loosening up until Michael reaches over and slings an arm around his shoulders, much too familiar for someone who is about to profess his undying love for another man.

“Hey, Jeremy, so about yesterday...the call...?”

Jeremy can feel his shoulders tensing incrementally, already dreading the possibility of Michael starting to gush about how much he likes Rich. He wants to be happy for Michael, he really does, but right now he’s still too heartbroken. And then he starts to wonder, Is it really heartbreak if you’ve never even dated? Or talked about your feelings? Or even gotten like, actually rejected at all? Probably not. That probably just means this is pining, oh God, I’m totally pining, Jesus, and he abruptly shrugs out of Michael’s grip.

“Yeah man, that’s cool, I’m gonna find some alcohol first, actually? And then you can tell me all about it.” He tries to keep the bitter edge out of his voice.

Michael looks a little confused, a little let down, a little nonplussed, but shakes it off quickly and gives Jeremy a hesitant smile. “Okay, sounds good. I could use some liquid courage right about now. You want me to go with you, or--”

“Nope. Thanks, though.” A thought occurs to him and he turns back quickly, concerned. “Man, you drove. Should you be drinking?”

Michael rolls his eyes, painfully fond. “Rich is our designated driver, don’t worry, man. You’ll still be going home with me tonight, drunk or not.”

Jeremy blanches, and then feels all the blood in his body shoot in two distinct and opposite directions at once, half to his face, and half...not to his face.

Michael pauses. “Wait, that didn’t sound--”
Rich’s hyena cackle draws the attention of several bystanders as he clutches his stomach and huffs out, “Hey, whoa, Michael, man of love, keep it in your pants, oh my God,” and Jeremy shuffles out of the room as quickly as possible, thoroughly confused, because if Michael is going to make uncomfortable innuendos at anyone, it should be at Rich, not Jeremy, because Jeremy isn’t even a blip on the Michael Mell Radar of Romantic Possibilities, which probably totally exists, and is most likely focused entirely in on Rich. If that’s how radars work. Jeremy’s a music major for a reason, he doesn’t really get all that science stuff, he had failed organic chem twice and barely scraped by the third time because he couldn’t figure out how to mix any of the damn chemicals correctly and resolved that the only mixing of substances he will ever engage in again will be the mixing of various fruit flavors and hard alcohol. The kind of hard alcohol that he is currently on a mission to find.

Jeremy wanders through a few more rooms before he finds a kitchen. He thinks it’s a kitchen, at least; all available surfaces are covered by various snack foods and an absolutely mind-boggling variety of alcohol. He pauses by a bottle of blueberry-flavored vodka, tempted, but ultimately settles for a generic beer. He’s looking for a subtle buzz, something to mellow him out, and doesn’t really want to end up blackout drunk in front of Michael. He might say something he regrets.

He takes a few sips of his generic Bud-Corona-whateverthefuck wheat juice concoction and wrinkles his nose. He’s never been a big fan of beer, but it feels good to have something to hold, and hopefully make him seem at least a smidge cooler than he actually is.

Jeremy hangs out by himself in the kitchen for maybe ten minutes, just people watching, bopping his head to the music, before he figures he should probably find his way back to Michael, who has hopefully confessed to Rich while Jeremy’s out of earshot. He can imagine exactly how it went down, too: Michal would pull Rich off to a quiet corner somewhere, probably totally anxious and giddy and cute, and he’d shuffle around a little before he’d cut straight to the point with a disarming, hesitant grin, and he’d say *Hey, Rich, I know this might sound weird, but...I’ve kind of been in like with you for, like, ever, man.*

And Rich would roll his eyes, smiling like an idiot, and pull Michael into a hug, saying something cocky but heartfelt like *Obviously you like me, I’m amazing. And so are you. Let’s actually get dinner this time, no Jeremy involved,* and Jeremy winces slightly in response, even though the whole conversation is imaginary, and he’s really dipping to new levels of pathetic if his own imaginary passive-aggressive insults are hurting his feelings.

He shakes himself out of his thoughts, realizing that he’s a little bit lost. He thought he was heading back in the right direction, or at least in a Michael-adjacent direction, but instead he’s ended up outside a much quieter room with various pieces of furniture pushed into a haphazard circle. This room actually has normal lighting, thank God, and seems to be much more subdued than the rest of the party. He wanders in and catches the tail end of a story being told by someone with an enthusiastic and surprisingly familiar voice:

“So then I wake up, and I automatically reach for my phone, right? But, like, it’s totally not there. And I’ve got this insane headache, like, really insane, and I notice I’m actually laying on concrete, and I sit up and then I see, floor-to-ceiling, bars.”

Someone gasps. “No fucking way!”
“Bet. I call bullshit, man.”

“No, no, no, I swear to God, it happened--so I get up and walk over to the bars, starting to realize that I’m in jail, obviously, and I flag this guard over and I ask, ‘Where am I’ because I’m super disoriented, and he says, I swear to God, he says, ¿Qué? and I’m starting to freak out, so I say ‘¿Dónde estoy?’ and he gets this weird look on his face and says ‘Estás en Acapulco de Juárez,’ and I say something like ‘¿Qué fecha?’ because honestly I was freaked out and my Spanish was definitely not up to par, and then he tells me, and get this, it was five whole days after the last thing I remembered. So yeah, in summary, I blacked out for five days and woke up in jail in Acapulco. I’m still not sure what actually happened.”

“No fucking way, man, that’s crazy, even for you.”

“What the hell were you on?”

“Yeah, and where can I get some?”

Mixed laughter, and Jeremy finally picks out who is telling the story. He’s got his back turned to Jeremy, leaning suavely in an armchair, gesturing smoothly as he talks. “No, no, no fucking way. I refuse to tell you what I was on, because I wouldn’t wish that shit on my worst enemy. Besides, I’m clean now. But I sure do have some fucking wild stories, I’ll tell you that much,” and then he runs a hand through his dark hair and the gesture is so familiar that Jeremy finally recognizes him as Jake.

Jeremy mutters a semi-mortified “Oh my God,” hoping he hasn’t just walked in on some private AA-type meeting or something, and somehow Jake must hear his voice above the rest of the supermodel-esque kids clamouring for his attention, because he turns around and locks eyes with Jeremy, already (or still?) smiling invitingly.

“Whoa, Jeremy, been waiting for you all night, pal! Get over here!”

Jeremy feels his legs move without his permission. All the people in the circle around Jake lean in too, apparently feeling the inescapable gravity of Jake’s charisma just as intensely as Jeremy is. It’s like Jake’s a supercharged, giant magnet, and everyone else is just paperclips. And not even the big, useful paperclips, either. The tiny ones that don’t actually do anything at all. Jeremy only has a moment to reflect on how fitting the metaphor of a useless paperclip is for his whole life up to this point before Jake’s pulling him towards his chair and rapidly introducing everyone in the little furniture circle.

“So this is my friend Jeremy, everybody! Jeremy, meet Felipe, Keith, Mark, Connor, Chloe,” Jeremy recognizes her as one of the girls making out on the stairs earlier, “Jenna, Megan, and Oliver. Oh, and Matt, don’t think I didn’t notice you over there, man. Everyone, meet Jeremy.”

Jeremy feels the attention of the entire room focus on him like a magnifying glass focusing a sun
beam on an ant and he feels vaguely like passing out. It’s bad enough to have people stare at him, but he has just discovered he tends to enter a whole different plane of social anxiety when the people doing the staring all look like movie stars. He can feel them judging his hair, his clothes, his beer, his awkwardness, his Jeremy-ness, everything about him, and he can tell that the room’s opinion of him is steadily dropping down towards icy disinterest until Jake reaches over and hooks an arm around his hip, firmly seating him on the arm of his chair.

The gesture is so natural and confident and, admittedly, sexy that Jeremy finds himself flushing. The combination hip-grab and Jeremy’s neon blush piques the curiosity of several of Jake’s friends, who begin throwing questions at him interrogation-style.

“So, Jeremy, what’s your major?”

“How did you two meet?”

“Love your hair, hon, what gel do you use?”

“How’s the party going for you?”

“Do you play any instruments?”

“Have you always lived in Jersey?”

“I get a really strong Queens vibe from you, you’re totally a New Yorker, right?”

“Got a girlfriend, honey?”

“How about a boyfriend?”

Jeremy takes a deep swig of beer, slightly overwhelmed. Jake takes notice of his obvious discomfort and thankfully takes over, ignoring the barrage of questions.

“Everyone play nice, alright? Don’t scare him away. I mean it.” Jake leans close and slings his arm around Jeremy’s waist, pulling him into a gentle side hug. “I like this one.”

Jeremy blushing harder, trying his best to ignore the warm weight of Jake’s arm resting against his lower back, because what the fuck is happening, he’s the center of attention in a group of extremely cool people, something is clearly going terribly off-balance in the universe, but then Jake’s hand starts doing something subtle and very, very, very nice where he’s kind of dragging his fingertips up and down Jeremy’s side, and it sort of feels like he’s being electrocuted but in a soundly fantastic way. And he isn’t even buzzed yet. Jesus.
Jake starts talking again but keeps doing the amazing hand-tracing-Jeremy’s-ribs-thing, so Jeremy’s having some trouble focusing in on the conversation, but he eventually gathers that Jake’s asking Chloe about her new girlfriend, someone named Brooke, and she’s so clearly infatuated that it makes Jeremy smile faintly until he realizes it’s exactly how Michael sounded on the phone the other day, and wow, yeah, he should really get back to trying to find Michael, he’s been missing for almost a half hour and that’s probably not a normal amount of time for someone to get a beer and come back, right? Right. Time to find Michael.

He reluctantly extracts himself from Jake’s arms. “Hey, uh, sorry, but I kind of came here with some people, and I should probably go and--”

Jake pouts. “Aww, Jere-bear, you just got here! Why don’t you stay awhile?”

Whoa. ‘Jere-bear? What the fuck? That certainly doesn’t sound particularly platonic. Jake gently tugs on his arm, urging him to stay, still playfully pouting. It’s unfairly cute, and the combined positive attention from super-hot Jake and all his super-hot friends makes Jeremy feel warm and soft inside and he caves, letting Jake reel him back in. After all, he rationalizes, Michael and Rich are probably off making out somewhere in the afterglow of their cheesy college party feelings-fest or whatever. They won’t even notice I’m gone.

He loses himself to the casual ebb and flow of the conversation, happy to just listen in. At first he’s afraid he’s intruding, or forcing himself into the group, but Jake’s friends are all surprisingly kind despite their intimidating appearances. And intimidating accomplishments. He learns that Chloe is actually Chloe Valentine, the internationally known and incredibly rich model and designer, Jenna is just about to finish her political science degree (“I have a knack for reading people. Don’t test me, Jeremy,”) and Mark is working on his film degree while editing Spielberg films on the side. He also learns that Jake has met most of his friends while working at his side job. His side job, as it turns out, is modeling. Of course.

“What kind of modeling?” and it’s the first thing he’s said all evening, so it catches the rest of the group a little off guard, but once they recover there’s a cacophony of wolf-whistles and suggestive hooting.

“Well…” Jake cuts through the noise, looking up at Jeremy with his head tilted flirtatiously, “If you really want to know, I did some work with Calvin Klein.”

“Calvin Klein...like the underwear company? Like…” and Jeremy blushes, uncomfortably aware that the rest of the group is looking at him expectantly, although he isn’t entirely sure what they’re expecting, “like you modeled boxers and stuff?”

“Totally. Mark was the lighting designer for one of my shoots, actually. That’s how we know each other,” and it takes a surprising amount of self control on Jeremy’s part to keep himself from immediately begging Mark for any photos from the shoot he may still have lying around. What can he say, Jake’s just that hot.
The topic of conversation ranges from Chloe’s new clothing line to the time Felipe ran into George Clooney on a plane and then to the time Jeremy ran into George Clooney at a restaurant (minus the fact that he was with Michael, come on, just repressrepressrepress that heartache), to a few recounts of Jake’s infamous escapades in his only slightly younger years. And Jake is really something else. He constantly brings the conversation around to Jeremy, building him up, smooth talking, flirting like a champ, and Jeremy can’t deny that it feels nice to have someone so clearly interested in him. He starts to feel like he could really belong in this strange world of supermodel twenty year olds and frat parties and suaveness, like he’s slowly soaking up portions of the beauty and success and chillness he’s surrounded by. And being embraced by, in Jake’s case. The other man is surprisingly affectionate. Jake’s sweet and friendly and, yeah, a little intimidating but Jeremy’s starting to realize he can convince himself to really, really, really like Jake if he tries.

He gets through a second beer and is feeling kind of glowy and bright and lambent, pleasantly buzzed, warm with a feeling of belonging in this unlikely group of people. Jake says something about Chet Baker and the rest of the group laughs. It suddenly reminds Jeremy of Michael, who (fortunately? Unfortunately? Jeremy doesn’t know what he wants anymore) still hasn’t come to hunt Jeremy down. Maybe he just left with Rich. Maybe they went home together in a distinctly non-platonic way, and Jeremy ignores the millionth instance of heartache he’s faced today and pulls out his phone to find that, holy fuck, goddamn, it’s already past twelve AM, and--

“Jeremy, how long have you played the piano, hon? Jake says you’re really good.” Chloe is smiling at him, sugar sweet and friendly. Jeremy really likes her. He decides he’ll deal with the potential issue of a missing Michael and finding a ride home a little later. He’s actually having fun right now.

“I’ve been playing for as long as I can remember. We always had a piano in my house, growing up. I was playing piano before I learned to walk.”

“Whoa, that’s crazy. Were your parents musicians?”

Jeremy shrugs, a little awkward. “My mom is. Was. Is, I guess. I don’t...We don’t really talk. Anymore.”

Silence. Great, Jeremy thinks furiously, Nice going, Jeremy, perfect, just go ahead and bring up your mommy issues in front of all of these cool people. Great. Way to make yourself look good, pal.

Jake surprises him by pulling him off the arm of the chair and into the chair itself, or more accurately into Jake’s lap, settling him comfortably on his thigh, Jeremy’s back pressed against Jake’s strong chest, and Jeremy thinks he should be completely mortified by such an open display of affection, but he can’t bring himself to feel anything more than slightly embarrassed.

“Hey, Jer, I’m sorry. That sucks. But,” and Jake places a large hand on Jeremy’s upper arm, “you’re an absolutely kickass pianist. Really, you’re insane, I mean all piano players are crazy talented but you? You’re like, the king of talent. Really. You’re amazing.” He punctuates his rambling with gentle, reassuring pats to Jeremy’s biceps. “I wish I could play the piano, honestly. I don’t get how
you can keep track of two different lines of music at once, man. Crazy.”

Jeremy rolls his eyes and tests his boundaries a little, rolling his head back to rest on Jake’s sternum. “Easy. I got two hands. One for each.”

Jake shifts, wrapping an arm around Jeremy’s stomach, pulling him in even closer. He’s radiating warmth. “Whatever, man. The point still stands. Piano players are insanely skilled. You have to keep track of, like, eighty different keys. Us trumpets only have three buttons. You gotta admit you’re the more talented one out of the two of us. Piano players are better than us trumpeters in every way.”

And maybe it’s the subtle buzz running liquid gold warmth through his veins, or the way Jake has started to trace a gentle pattern against Jeremy’s ribs, or the way the rest of the group has politely started other conversations, leaving them in an unexpected bubble of limited privacy, or maybe it’s the ever-present Michael related heartache Jeremy can’t seem to get rid of, or maybe it’s just the way Jake is smiling at him, open and vulnerable and a little shy, but Jeremy takes a risk and says, “Not true. I’ve heard trumpeters make the best kissers. Prove me right?”

Jake’s hand stops tracing. Jeremy feels his spine start to freeze despite Jake’s warmth, and he carefully looks up at Jake through his eyelids, trying to gauge if he’s totally overstepped a boundary because he can feel the intervals between the vibrations of Jake’s heartbeat start to decrease, his pulse speeding up. For a terrifying moment Jake’s face is blank and closed off, and Jeremy’s afraid he’s completely misread the situation before something in Jake’s expression shifts and he’s staring at Jeremy with red-hot, burning, unbridled want. He lifts Jeremy bodily, flipping him so he’s straddling Jake’s thighs with his own, crouched a little awkwardly in the small chair, and wow, yeah, the manhandling thing is definitely really very nice, slam dunk on Jake’s part for initiating that, and then Jake runs a gentle hand along Jeremy’s cheek the same way he had done in class so long ago, or maybe only a few days ago? Jeremy’s kind of losing track of the way time works right now because Jake’s tilting his head and leaning in, and he whispers close enough to Jeremy’s face that he can feel the movement of his lips as he asks, “Is this okay?”

Jeremy answers by falling forward, sealing his lips onto Jake’s. He feels Jake hum appreciatively and wrap his arms around Jeremy’s lower back, pressing their torsos together. The tempo is slow and subdued and gentle, and it makes Jeremy unfortunately, painfully, longingly think of Michael, so he tilts his jaw and settles lower in Jake’s lap, quickening the pace, focusing on recreating the chemistry they’d found in their duet.

Jake, apparently sensing Jeremy’s enthusiastic consent, swipes his tongue against Jeremy’s lips, slow and soft and teasing, and Jeremy opens his mouth obligingly, running a hand down Jake’s neck to press against his, whoa, Jesus, his rock hard abs. They stay that way for what feels like an eternity, locked in a deep, slightly dirty kiss, and Jeremy can feel his consciousness of everything else fading away until he’s focusing only on the warm press of Jake’s mouth on his own, until a loud, slightly desperate voice breaks through his trance because the voice is very familiar and very sad and getting closer by the second and Jeremy finds himself immediately and instinctively concerned.

“Hey, has anyone seen Jeremy? He’s about this tall, looks like he’s made out of toothpicks, beautiful blue eyes--”
It’s Michael. Jeremy breaks away from Jake, ignoring the soft disappointed noise Jake makes at the loss of contact, and makes eye contact with Michael over the top of the chair. Michael looks initially relieved, but stops short as he gives Jeremy a once-over, likely taking in his red, spit slicked lips, his unruly hair, his disheveled clothes, his flushed face, all undeniably symptoms of a slightly tipsy makeout session. Jeremy’s frozen in place, feeling unexplainably guilty. Michael’s brow creases in confusion, and he walks closer, fixing his angle, until he gets close enough to realize Jeremy’s in someone’s lap, and he looks weirdly hurt before Jake tilts his head in Michael’s direction, casual as hell, smirking.

“Hey, Mell. I found Jeremy. We’re a little busy at the moment.” He presses a smug kiss to the underside of Jeremy’s jaw.

Michael’s face goes blank. “Of course. I had something to tell him, but it’s...not important.” He turns to look at Jeremy, and there’s something fragile and off balance in his eyes when he asks “Do you need a ride home? Rich and I are heading out.”

The mention of ‘Rich and I’ freezes Jeremy’s heart a little, and he shifts lower in Jake’s lap. He tries to keep his tone as casual as possible as he glances back at Jake and says, “No. I, uh...think I might be staying over, actually.” Jake cocks an impressed eyebrow at Jeremy as Jenna wolf-whistles somewhere to his right.

Michael makes a choked noise somewhere between a cough and a gasp and he takes an unsteady step backwards. “Oh, yeah, cool. Fun. Good for you, man. Uh. Yeah. Well, I’ve got to go, uh, but you two--be safe, obviously, uh, see you in class Monday I guess,” and then he turns and bolts out the door. Jeremy has an intense urge to run after him and make sure he’s okay because it sounded like he and Rich were fine but he seemed really upset, but then Jake is picking him up bridal-style and standing up, smiling warmly.

“So you think you’re staying over?” and Jeremy blushes and whispers “If that’s fine, I mean, hell yeah,” and Jake tosses him over a shoulder like he weighs nothing and carries him upstairs.

Later that night, as Jake kisses a path down Jeremy’s chest, he pauses and whispers, “I’m sorry for being so aggressive to Mell earlier. I should have asked, I mean, is he-- are you two--”

Jeremy cuts him off with a burning kiss that briefly calms the burning in his chest as he replies, “No. He’s--we’re nothing. Less than nothing.”

Jake returns the kiss, satisfied, and doesn’t bring Michael up for another four months.
:^]  

im @coloredpencilroses on tumblr. pls feel free to yell at me there or in the comments...,
Jeremy wakes up to the sound of Jake’s phone blaring a rendition of Cut to the Chase. It’s loud and brassy and aggressive and entirely unconducive to sleep, so he nudges an elbow into the monolithic mass enveloping him from behind, a little harder than necessary. A sleep-heavy arm settles over his waist, dragging him deeper into the bed, and the gesture is warm only in the physical sense. He nudges the mass again, tired. “Jake. Jake, shut your fuckin’ alarm off, it’s too early in the morning for fusion jazz--”

“Mmnph, Jeremy, babe, it’s Saturday, lemme sleep--”

“It’s Wednesday, you have an eight o’clock class, get out of bed--”

“Shh.” Jake taps a gentle pattern on Jeremy’s stomach. After a moment he recognizes it as the song’s trumpet line. “Just let me enjoy this.”

Jeremy shuffles around in the blankets so he’s facing Jake. “Enjoy what?”

“This.” Jake blinks sleepily, barely visible in the cold blue morning light. “Let me enjoy the jazz. And my pretty boyfriend. And his--Jesus, Jeremy, his freezing cold feet, why are you so cold all the time--”

“Because I’m skinny and it’s December. Obviously.”

Jake rolls his eyes props himself up on an elbow. He presses a teasing hand into Jeremy’s side. “You wouldn’t be so fuckin’ skinny if you went to the gym with me. Or just, like, tried to eat like a normal person.”

Jeremy scoffs. “Like a normal person”? What is that supposed to mean?” He means for it to sound playful, but there’s a prickly edge to his voice.

“No, stop, it’s too early for another fight.” Jake smiles mischievously. “And we can only...make up so many times before it gets boring.”

“If it’s so unbearably boring, I could just stop ‘making up’ with you altogether.” Jeremy’s really not in the mood to humor Jake.

“C’mon. Jer. It’s a joke.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jeremy relents, curling deeper into his blankets. “I’ll forgive you if you shut that fucking alarm off.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m going.” Jake spends another moment kneading into Jeremy’s side before he slips his cold fingers under the hem of Jeremy’s shirt, wearing a mildly seductive expression that clearly says “I’d be more than willing to skip my eight o’clock if you’re feeling up to it,” except Jeremy is really not feeling up to it, actually, and instead of reciprocating with some lazy groping of his own he pushes Jake towards the edge of the bed. “Now. I’m trying to sleep.”

Jake half-heartedly tosses a pillow in Jeremy’s direction and stumbles out of bed, pawing blindly for his alarm. “Man, your dorm is freezing.”

“So put on a shirt.”

“And deprive you of a full view of my amazing body? I guess if that’s what you really want…” Jake cocks an eyebrow in Jeremy’s direction, striking a cheesy body-builder pose.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, you used to be a model. Now put the abs away before you put someone’s eye out.” He’s not really in the mood to humor Jake, but he doesn’t know what else to do.


“Cause it’s cheaper than a real apartment.”

“Not if you have a roommate,” Jake counters, hunting around for the stash of clothes he’s taken to leaving in Jeremy’s dorm.

“Yeah, if. And I don’t. So.” Jeremy yawns, fading in and out of alertness. Jake pauses and rubs the
back of his neck, a blurry, indistinct shape under the first rays of sunlight trickling through the
window and Jeremy’s bleary early-morning vision. He spaces out for a second, watching the way the
light seems to freeze up before it actually touches Jake, going from gold to a dreary blue as it floods
into the small dorm. Jake says something, pulling a shirt over his head, facing Jeremy hesitantly.
He realizes after a few seconds that Jake is waiting for a reply. He tries to say “Sorry, I didn’t hear
you” but instead he mutters “Mmphng?” and blinks hazily in Jake’s general direction.
“Are you sleeping already?”
“Mnnnalmost?”
“Did you hear anything I just said?” Jake shrugs on a jacket and sits back on the bed, resting a hand
over the blankets on the shallow rise of Jeremy’s hip.
“Mnnm...no.”
“Typical.” Jake leans in, pressing a chaste kiss to Jeremy’s lips. “I’ll ask you when you’re more
awake.”
Jeremy sits up slightly and returns the kiss, unfeeling, mechanical, routine, before falling back into
bed.
“Make sure you’re up in time for class, babe. You really need to stop being late. I’ll text you.” Jake
grabs his keys and makes his way to the door.
“Uh-huh.”
“And don’t forget your laptop. It’s charging on the wall.”
“Mhm.”
“Don’t forget to turn in your final projects. Today’s the deadline.”
“I know.”
“If you go somewhere for lunch, let me know so I don’t think you’re, like, dead in a practice room or
something.”
“Kay.”
“Speaking of lunch, make sure you eat before you get to the theater tonight. If you pass out onstage,
it’s on you.”
“Fine.”
“Is your shirt ironed? And are your pants pressed? I know you left your music in the studio, if you’re
not in class I’ll try to pick it up for you.”
“Okay.”
“Make sure you have your tie before you leave later, Reyes’ll be pissed if you forget before the--”
“Jesus Christ, are you my boyfriend or my mom?!” Jeremy snaps, a shade too harsh.
“I dunno, Jeremy, considering the fact that I’m actually in your life--” Jake cuts off, grimacing.
Jeremy leans back on his elbows, shocked. “Finish that thought.”
“No, that was a low blow. I didn’t mean it.”
“Just like you didn’t mean to get that little blonde’s number last week?”
Jake’s jaw shuts with an audible click. He leans back against the doorframe with a quiet thud, arms
crossed over his broad chest. “I thought you were over that. I told you, I didn’t mean to, she thought
I was flirting with her.”
“Because you were flirting with her!”
“I was not, you’re just paranoid.”
“So you bought her a drink right in front of me for fun? Just platonically? That’s absolutely flirting.”
“For the last time, it just happened, alright? It didn’t mean anything. I’m an attractive guy, sometimes
people actually appreciate it.”
“Are you implying that I don’t—that I don’t appreciate you? What?” Jeremy’s aware that his volume
is starting to spike, but he’s too tired and upset to reign himself in.
“I dunno, man. Sometimes I really can’t tell. It’s like you’re only with me because you feel like it’s
what you’re supposed to be doing. Even now, I feel like you’re just fighting me because you feel like
you have to.”
Jeremy ignores how accurate Jake’s accusation feels and strikes back, exasperated, “No, I’m fighting
you because I’m mad, you can’t just bring up my mom like that--”
“Are you fighting because you’re mad? Or are you fighting with me because it’s routine? Sometimes I feel like--like you’re not even there. Or you ice me out. I can’t figure out what’s going on in your head, Jeremy, sometimes it feels like you don’t even really like me. Okay, yeah, you got me, I flirt with a lot of people. Because I’m not even sure you actually care enough to get jealous.”

“Wow.” Jeremy reels back, his spine digging into their-- no, his-- bed’s headboard. “So did I pass your test? Am I possessive enough to be your boyfriend?”

“You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Do I know? I’m not the only distant one in this relationship, half the time I just feel like you’re here for the sex, which is, admittedly, really great but relationships are more than just--”

“Jeremy, are you kidding me? I love you, I tell you that every day, how can you think I don’t care about you--”

“There’s a difference between saying it and meaning it.”

Someone pounds on the wall to their left. “Can you argue about sex at literally any other time besides seven AM?” It startles Jeremy out of his anger for a moment and he realizes exactly how hurt Jake looks.

Jeremy winces. “Jake…”

Jake physically pulls back, bumping into the wall behind him. “Well, you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

Jake physically pulls back, bumping into the wall behind him. “Well, you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

Someone pounds on the wall to their left. “Can you argue about sex at literally any other time besides seven AM?” It startles Jeremy out of his anger for a moment and he realizes exactly how hurt Jake looks.

Jeremy winces. “Jake…”

Jake shakes his head, lips pressed together into a thin line.

Jeremy tries again, tugging a hand through his sleep-mussed hair. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said--”

“It’s fine. I deserved it. Sorry for waking you up.” He opens the door and starts to head out before throwing a monotone “I love you, Jer,” over his shoulder, almost an afterthought.

“Yeah.” Jeremy pulls his blankets up to his neck.

“Jeremy?”

“Yeah?”

“I said I love you.”

“Yeah. You too.” and Jeremy hates how it sounds like they’re both lying.

Jake shuts the door softly. Jeremy waits, listening to the sound of footsteps fading away. He counts to a hundred after he hears Jake’s car start and pulls out his phone, feeling strangely guilty as he keys in Michael’s number and hits call.

Honestly, there’s no reason he should be guilty. Sure, spending an extra four months in Michael’s vicinity had turned his infatuation into a whole quagmire of intense and hard to navigate feelings like extreme respect, admiration, and some entirely inappropriate and definitely non-platonic love. But he values Michael as a friend before all else. He’s never had anyone get him so thoroughly, and he’s never understood anyone as well as he understands Michael. And, okay, so Michael and Rich aren’t together, and it should probably upset him on Michael’s behalf, but he can’t help but feel a little relieved. And maybe Michael’s giving off some subtle interested-in-Jeremy vibes, unless Jeremy’s reading into things too deeply, which he probably is, actually. And maybe he and Jake don’t get along quite as well as they should, especially after four months of dating. But Jake seems to really, legitimately like him. At least most of the time. He probably even loves him. And that feeling is kind of addictive.

An errant tear slides down his face and he quickly wipes it away, determined not to cry over another stupid fight. Michael picks up after two rings, and Jeremy feels his shoulders relax at the sound of the familiar voice.

“Hello? Jeremy?” Michael’s voice is drowsy.

“Michael? Did I wake you up? I can go.”

“No! No, you’re fine, I was already up.”

“I know that’s a lie.” Jeremy slips easily into the rhythm of Michael’s conversation, centering himself.

“No dude, I love to wake up at the asscrack of dawn. Do it all the time. You should know this about me.”

“In my internal list of characteristics I attribute to Michael Mell, ‘early riser’ for sure takes the top
“Right next to ‘punctual,’ I bet.”
“Of course. The Michael I know has never been late to a class ever in his life.”
Michael laughs, and the sound sends a pleasant rush of warmth down his back, fighting off the late December chill that has settled into his room. “Okay, while I always enjoy talking about how fantastic I am, is there a reason you called me stupid early?”
“Does there always have to be a reason?” Jeremy rolls onto his side, tucking his knees into his chest, ignoring the fact that he can still feel a Jake-shaped indent in the bed. “Can’t I just call my best friend because I want to talk to him?”
“Aww, Jer, am I really your best friend? That’s sweet.”
“Of course you’re my best friend. Duh.”
“Not duh.”
“Totally duh.”
“Totally not duh!”
“Why? Who else would my best friend be? Rich?” Jeremy rolls his eyes at the mental image of his being best-anythings with Rich. He’d thought they were on alright terms, but after Jake’s party so many months ago, things had started to get weird between them. Rich sent him a single cryptic text the day after he’d stayed over at Jake’s that read ‘what the fuck, man?’ and refused to talk to Jeremy for almost a month after.
Michael interrupts his train of thought. “Huh, what a mystery, I don’t know, who could your best friend possibly be?”
“That’s what I’m saying!”
“No, Jeremy, you’re such a dork. I’m being sarcastic. Like always. Who in your life would a reasonable, objective person assume you would be best friends with?”
“Uhh…you? I think? I spend, like, all my downtime at your apartment.”
“Jesus. No. I’m talking about your fuckin’ boyfriend, man.” Jeremy wrinkles his nose, a little nonplussed. “Isn’t that really weird? Being best friends with your boyfriend?”
Michael pauses, and Jeremy can hear the soft squeak of bedsprings as Michael presumably sits up in surprise. “What? No. Honestly, I think it’s weird if you don’t think of your partner as, like, your main man. If you don’t get along in a friends way, how are you gonna get along in a romantic way?”
Jeremy sighs, feeling suddenly drained. “I wish I knew.”
“Man, you’ve always antagonized each other lately.”
“Yeah, I guess. It’s nothing big, really, I just--” His voice wavers and he cuts off abruptly.
“No, I’m fine. Really. I shouldn’t even be upset, I escalated it, but he...brought up my mom and it just set me off.”
“Whoa, hey, hey, Jeremy, buddy, are you okay? Do you need me to come over?” Michael sounds immediately concerned.
“I deserved it. We’ve just been kind of antagonizing each other lately.”
“Man, you’ve always antagonized each other. When’s the last time you went a whole week without fighting?”
Jeremy thinks hard. “I guess sometime in October?”
“Yeah. That’s, like, two months. That isn’t great, Jeremy.”
“It’s just the way we are sometimes. And Jake’s really a nice guy,” Jeremy justifies, although he knows he doesn’t sound entirely convincing, so he bumps up his praise a notch. “Actually, he’s perfect. He’s popular and sweet and romantic and--” I don’t know why I don’t love him, Jeremy thinks, but instead says “--he really cares about me.”
“I know Jake’s a great guy. And so are you. But together you get along like a house on fire.”
Jeremy laughs. “Doesn’t that mean we get along really well?”
“No way. It means you don’t get along at all.”
“No, I’m pretty sure it’s the opposite.” Michael pauses. “Okay. Hold up. We’re coming back to this, but I have to google this stupid fuckin’ idiom first, let me put you on speakerphone—”

Jeremy hears a quiet beep and then the sound of furious typing.

“Michael, are you seriously—”

“Dude. I love you, but I need you to be quiet while I figure out if I’ve been saying this dumb expression wrong my whole life.”

Jeremy fights off the goofy grin that threatens to burst onto his face at the casual ‘I love you’ and instead focuses on Michael’s enraged gasp as he learns that he has, in fact, been using ‘like a house on fire’ incorrectly.

“This is bullshit. Utter bullshit. English is so stupid.”

“I told you. You’re saying that we get along great.”

“Okay. Yeah, I meant the opposite. You guys bring out the worst in each other.”

“I guess. But we have really good...chemistry.”

“Oh God. Ew, ew, ew, Jeremy, I didn’t need to hear that, okay? Jesus.” Another quiet beep, and Michael’s voice is suddenly much closer. “I know you guys can’t keep your hands to yourselves, but if that’s the only redeeming part of your whole thing, maybe there’s something wrong.”

“I...yeah,” Jeremy concedes, “I’ve been thinking about that a lot recently. But we’ve been together for a pretty long time. Longer than I expected. And he loves—we love each other. It’s just an addictive feeling, I guess. Love. Or whatever.”

“Love or whatever,” Michael repeats, teasing. “I’m sure it is. But...” and Michael’s tone shifts lower, concerned and bittersweet, “There’s love, and then there’s convenience. And I don’t think you’re necessarily with Jake for the right reasons. I guess that’s just how I see it. As your best friend.” There’s a slight pause as Michael lets Jeremy absorb his advice. “So anyways. You ready for the concert tonight?”

“Oh God.” Jeremy presses his face into his pillow, only slightly grateful for the change of subject. He wasn’t exactly thrilled to talk about his shaky, possibly failing, probably should have ended a while ago relationship with Jake, but the idea of a public performance is far from exciting. “I really, really, really am not. Ready, I mean. God.”

“You mean you’re not hype as hell to play jazz and wear stupid sequined matching vests in front of a huge audience of your peers and other sundry jazz appreciators?”

“Jesus. Please don’t phrase it like that. I’m freaked out enough already.” A wave of nausea threatens to pull him under.

“Why? You’ve been kicking ass in rehearsals. You’re gonna kick ass tonight.”

“Oh. Not to turn this into, fuckin’, Jeremy’s Therapy Hour or whatever, but the last time I performed in front of an audience…” Jeremy trails off, leaving the ‘I fucked up my whole life’ implied.

“Ha. Yeah, okay, that’s fair, I get why you’d be a little nervous. But you’re an amazing musician. You’ll be fine. I promise.” Jeremy scoffs an amused “Thanks Michael, my anxiety is cured now,” but he surprises himself by realizing he actually does feel a little better. Not necessarily great, not even good, but more stable. And that’s better than nothing.

“You’re very welcome my main man. My homie. My bro. I gotta get going, actually, but I’ll see you in theory? Theory like the class. Not like I’m theorizing that I might see you later. You get me.”

“I get you,” Jeremy replies, grinning.

“Good. Great. Also make sure you have those sweet sweet PDFs to turn in for our duet, I think my laptop might have eaten them? Anyways. See you around, buddy.”

“Yeah, man. Sounds good.” Jeremy pauses, waiting for Michael to hang up. A few seconds pass in relative silence, save for the soft sounds of Michael’s breathing.

“Jer?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you gonna hang up, or...?”
“Yeah.” Jeremy holds on for a second longer, storing up as much Michael-related-positivity as he can. “See you later, man.”
“See ya.”
He ends the call and rolls out of bed, forcing himself to focus on Michael instead of any of the various situations he’s facing that could cause him to have an anxiety attack before eight A.M..

Chapter End Notes

ok. first of all im So Sorry for being AWOL for so long!! school has hit me real hard lately so i had to take a minibreak. not much action this time round, and sorry this chapter is a little short, i was originally gonna have this chapter be the first half of a bigger chapter, but i got abt 2000 words into the second half and decided the next chapter would probably work better as a standalone because its gonna b Crazy. hit me up on tumblr at coloredpencilroses for random updates or just to Yell about this Story :^)

ps sorry if the formatting is screwy im updating on mobile. ill fix it when i get back to my laptop!
When I Fall In Love

Chapter Notes

Okay: normally I don’t do pre-chapter notes, but there’s a brief description of some anxiety this chapter and I want to make sure I put a warning in! Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jeremy leaves his dress shirt and pants pressed and hanging neatly in his closet and heads out the door, determined to make it to class a little early for his final presentation. Halfway across campus, he realizes he left his laptop at home and has to double back, but still manages to make it back in time to grab a desk near the back of the class.

He takes a quick look around the room, noting that Jake is nowhere to be seen. He drops into the first empty desk he sees, hesitantly nodding at Rich as he sits. Rich bares his teeth in response, less of a smile and more of a snarl. Jeremy quickly looks away and focuses on booting up his computer, making sure he hasn’t unintentionally left any embarrassing tabs open before he starts his presentation. After a few moments of consideration, he decides he should probably clear his search history. And blast his cache. Just in case.

A few minutes later, the door pops open and Michael shuffles in wearing his usual outfit of a hoodie and jeans. He’s holding two styrofoam cups and hands one off to Jeremy as he passes his desk.

“Hey, buddy. Got you some coffee. Figured you could use it.”

“Thanks, man.” Jeremy takes the cup, appreciating the warmth that sinks into his hands, driving away the ever-present chill in his fingers. He looks closely at Michael and notes the dark circles under his friend’s eyes. “Sorry for waking you up so early.”

“No biggie. I’m always happy to talk to my main man.” Michael falls into the desk behind Jeremy and slings his bag onto the floor. “Although maybe don’t make it a habit ’cause I am stupid tired right now.” He rests his chin on the desk and looks up at Jeremy for a second before taking a deep swig of coffee.

Jeremy takes a drink from his own and moans quietly as he feels the caffeine hit his system. “Oh my God. You’re a lifesaver.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Michael reaches out and punches his shoulder gently, making his coffee slosh.

“Hey, watch it!” Jeremy smiles, playfully pushing his hand away.

“You watch it,” Michael responds, reaching over and tousling Jeremy’s hair.

Jeremy ducks out of Michael’s grip and takes another sip of coffee. “Mature. Great comeback, dude, really, totally stellar form--”

“Shut up, dude, I buy you coffee and this is how you repay me?”

“No one ever said you had to buy me anything.”
“Psh. So ungrateful.”


Michael laughs and puts on a falsetto voice, fluttering his eyelashes. “Aww, Jer, you’re grateful for me? That’s so sweet, dude...”

“All. Whatever. Shut up.” Jeremy shakes his head and stares down at his coffee cup.

“I’m just kidding around. I’m grateful for you too, man, c’mere.” Michael reaches over his desk and slings an arm around Jeremy, pulling him into a clumsy side hug. Jeremy rests his head against Michael’s shoulder, letting out an involuntary sigh as Michael’s warmth soaks into his core.

“Fuck, man. You’re cold.”

“So I’ve been told.” Jeremy agrees, hugging his coffee closer to his chest. His hands are still freezing cold despite the fact that he’s been inside for several minutes and he has a sudden idea. “Hey, Michael?”

“Yeah?”

“What’s cooler than being cool?” Jeremy surreptitiously shifts his drink into one hand.

Michael pulls back a little without breaking the hug so he’s looking down at Jeremy. “Dude, are you trying to meme on me? It won’t work. I’m the meme master.”

“Just answer the question, dude. What’s cooler than being cool?”

Michael sighs and tilts his head towards the ceiling. “Ice cold?”

“Nope. The correct answer is ‘Jeremy Heere.’” He reaches out and presses the back of his hand against Michael’s neck.

“Jesus Christ! You’re freezing, you asshole!” Michael laughs and tries to pull out of reach of Jeremy’s icy hands. “Dude, what the fuck? Are you a vampire or some shit? That can’t be healthy.”

Jeremy cackles and curls back around his coffee cup. “Vampires suck. Werewolves are where it’s at, bro.”

“You’re such a furry.” Michael rolls his eyes fondly.

Jeremy squawks indignantly. “I am not, Jesus, Michael, you can’t just say stuff like that in public—”

“Yeah? I can’t say things about your totally-not-secret furry feti—”

The door slams open and Jeremy jumps, nearly sending his coffee flying. Jake stumbles in, his hair windswept and disheveled, his jacket dusted with tiny snowflakes. He glances around the classroom and spots Jeremy and Michael, lips compressing into a thin line. Michael quickly leans back into his chair, taking a casual sip of coffee as Jeremy steadies his own drink and motions Jake over to the empty desk to his left.

Jake walks down the aisle between desks, up to the empty seat, and then right past to the back of the room. He sets his bag down in an open chair between Rich and Chloe, pulls out his laptop, and starts to type, all without sparing Jeremy a single glance.

At the front of the room, the professor clears her throat and turns on a projector. “Alright. Final presentations, everybody. Who feels like going first?”

The class is silent. Jeremy tries to catch Jake’s eye, waving a little pathetically at his boyfriend over his shoulder. Jake continues to ignore him.

“No volunteers? Alright, cool, guess I’ll volunteer a group myself. Let’s see…” She stares down at her computer, probably looking through an attendance roster. “How about...Jeremy and Michael. You guys are up first.” The professor motions them towards the front of the room without looking up from her computer.

“You ready, man?” Michael tilts his head, smiling, trying to mask his obvious concern.

“Oh. Yeah, I guess.” He takes another glance over his shoulder and watches Rich fluff a few unmelted snowflakes out of Jake’s hair. Jake bats him away, laughing. He feels like he should be upset. “I just have to talk about Bill Evans, right? Super easy.”

“Totally easy. You got this,” Michael reaffirms, offering his hand to Jeremy.

Jeremy takes it, and Michael surprises him by pulling him out of his desk. “Really. Don’t be anxious. We got this.”

Jeremy nods and quickly pulls his hand out of Michael’s, realizing that Jake is now staring at him. Hard. He avoids eye contact and heads to the front of the class, Michael trailing slightly behind, unintentionally acting as a buffer between Jake’s intense glare and Jeremy.

He hooks his laptop up to the projector and pulls up a recording of his duet with Michael, still doing his best not to look at his royally pissed off boyfriend. He’s already terrible at public speaking, God knows he really can’t handle relationship drama on top of his presentation anxiety. He shifts from foot to foot, waiting for some kind of signal to start—oh, okay, the professor is giving him a thumbs up. That’s probably a good sign. Here goes nothing.

“Hey, so, I’m Jeremy--” His voice cracks violently. A few people near the back of the class giggle and his face burns red. He clears his throat and starts over, scuffing his shoe on the ground.

“I’m Jeremy. This is Michael, and, uh, we, well, obviously we did a composition project, that was the assignment, so, we did that, heh, and...uh...it’s a duet! Because there’s two of us, and, I, uh…” What was he supposed to be talking about again? He’s drawing a total blank. All he can focus on is the feeling of Jake’s stare burning a hole in his head. “I...played the piano on it...” More giggling. He risks a look out towards the class and immediately regrets it. Jake is staring at him impassively, arms crossed and chin tilted up. Jeremy can’t read anything in his expression besides vaguely disappointed stoicism. He quickly snaps his gaze back down to his laptop, but the damage has already been done. He’s flustered and stumbling over his words. “Piano...is what I composed for...because I play it...and Michael doesn’t? So obviously I have to play it, or who else would? Um. Maybe Rich would. He could probably do it. Or actually most of you guys probably could, because this is an advanced music class so most everybody is probably pretty musically talented. Not to say that Michael isn’t musically talented, because he is, but I mean in, like, a piano way. If that makes sense.”

“It doesn’t!” someone calls out.

Jeremy cringes. Michael gently nudges an elbow into his side and whispers, “Bill Evans, dude.”
Shit, that’s right. He just has to talk about Bill Evans. Easy. Totally easy. He gives Michael a grateful grin and does a conversational one-eighty. “Speaking of piano talent, Bill Evans is pretty cool.” He can hear someone mutter, “Smooth transition” but tunes them out in favor of fumbling for a notecard he has stashed in his back pocket.

“Yeah. Bill Evans. Cool. I tried to go for an Evans-y vibe in this composition because I feel like our style is pretty similar? He was classically trained and used elements of that in his jazz just like I do. And his playing style is so expressive, with all his tertian harmonies and Lydian scales and the like. So I definitely tried to pull some inspiration from there. Yeah.” He looks to Michael for approval.

Michael nods and joins in. “And we all know every Evans has to have his Scott LaFaro, so I toned down a lot this time around and modeled after him. Even went acoustic upright for this recording, as much as I hate not being plugged into an amp at all times.”

Rich snickers.

“Shut up, Rich. Sometimes you have to sacrifice style for your art.” Michael reaches over Jeremy and hits play on their recording.

“Anyway, here’s the song, dudes.”

Jeremy stares at his feet as he hears recording-Michael quietly count off a beat.

Recording-Jeremy plays a few hesitant chords and stumbles over a trill before pulling back into a syncopated chord pattern. He can hear himself playing a little off-kilter, nerves infecting his flow, before Michael drops in on the bass and backs him up, reassuring and friendly, and his music immediately blooms. His sound goes from nervous and off-balance to nuanced and complex in the space of a beat. He’s never really noticed it before, the way he and Michael actually make a pretty great duo, but watching the recording with the rest of the class has him seeing it from a fresh perspective.

The jazz number is upbeat and playful, a polar opposite mood from their initial composition— they’d ditched their original chord pattern a few days after Jake’s party, deciding to start from scratch. Jeremy wanted to know why they were starting over, but Michael had only laughed him off and stuttered something vague about the “chords not fitting the vibe anymore.”

“Oh, man. Let’s just make it up as we go, huh?”

“Okay,” Jeremy replies, half amused, half concerned. “So what vibe are we looking to fit, then?”

“I dunno. I dunno. Our vibe.”

That’s the least simple thing in the world, Jeremy thinks. Instead he says “Yeah, sure. Our vibe.”
“Unless you have any better ideas?”

He doesn’t.

“Alright. So. Our vibe. Defining characteristics, go.”

“Jesus, I don’t know, man.”


“Um…” Jeremy plinks an E-flat major chord. “Safe.”

Michael echoes his chord, and then slides into a C minor. “Yeah, good one. Light, as in light-hearted. You feel?”

“I feel,” Jeremy replies, starting to smile, bringing in a bright B-flat major. He gets into the groove a little, comping a few tritones on his right hand.

“Nice. That’s jazzy. Keep doing that, I’m gonna…” Michael trails off, starting to play an upbeat walk. “Hell yeah. Alright, bring it down to an A.”

Jeremy obliges, bopping his head in time with Michael’s improv line admiringly. He completes the progression, running a scale back into E-flat. Michael hedges for a few bars before asking, “So who solos first?”

“Ugh.” Jeremy wrinkles his nose, adding a sharp diminished chord. “Can’t we just do the whole thing as, like, a duet?”

“No way. That’d be so boring, bro. C’mon. Solo. Solo. Solo!”

“Fine. But you start.”

“Deal.” Michael pauses for a second. “Can you give me a little more swing, though?”

“How? I’m already swinging as much as I can. If I swing anymore, I’m gonna lose the beat.”

“Nah. C’mon, you can dig in a little more. Dah-dut da-dah-dut, yeah, that’s it. One-and a two- and a three--Hell yeah.” He plays an eighth note subdivision, showing Jeremy which beats to stress. “Now you’re cookin’. Keep that up, dude.” Michael stops his subdivision once Jeremy catches on and drops into the solo line with no warning.

Jeremy can almost swear he’s heard what Michael’s playing somewhere before, the line feels so familiar, but he just can’t place the song. The melody is bright and bouncy, perkily pressing into the off-beats and skipping from chord to chord. Jeremy reflexively smiles as Michael tugs him through a quick set of meter changes and accidentals and into a quick waltz. “Michael, we cannot just go from a \( \frac{5}{8} \) time into a \( \frac{3}{4} \), that’s totally unconventional.”

“Unconventional is my middle name, bro.” Michael skims his hand up the bass, tone deepening into something vulnerable, and a little sad. It reminds Jeremy inexplicably of sitting in Michael’s apartment, drinking wine and watching him cook.

“Whoa. That mood change gave me whiplash. Little warning next time?”

Michael responds by pressing deeper into his range, sounding more melancholy with every passing beat. Jeremy listens harder, trying to figure out where the unexpected tinge of sadness in the music is coming from, but hits a wall. Michael’s blocking something off, subtly shaping the music around
something he doesn't want Jeremy to know.

Two can play at that game, Jeremy thinks, before jumping into a solo of his own. He’s playing with the first time Michael had ever beaten him in a video game in mind, dimming the tone of the song to mimic the low light of Michael’s apartment. The wine-drunk warmth of his contentedness translates smoothly into rolling tenor chords, his right hand overlapping into the keyboard’s lower territory, a muddled, pleasantly cozy melody. He throws a few semiquavers into the mix, careful to keep any leftover crush-adjacent feelings locked away. He can tell Michael senses an empty space in the music by the way he tilts his head and leans into his bass, but he doesn’t say anything. He just backs off a little, giving Jeremy space to solo, supporting him quietly from the accompaniment.

They wind the song down a few minutes later. Jeremy hunts around for a pen and some blank sheet music while Michael silently leans against his bass. He looks like he wants to ask Jeremy something, but instead he packs up his bass, frowning.

Recording-Jeremy and Recording-Michael finish the song with a soft major harmony, trailing off into nothing. Jeremy stares off into middle distance as the class claps hesitantly. The song was a lot more stilted than he remembered it being, and it’s obvious from the music that both he and Michael were hiding something from each other. Even Jake had probably noticed—Jeremy risks a glance to the side where, yeah, oh God, Jake is leaning onto his desk, eyes narrowed in a combination of confusion and suspicion. Jeremy shoots him a shaky, questioning grin as he follows Michael back to his desk. He tries his best to feel disappointed when Jake ignores him, but only manages to dredge up some deep-seated exhaustion.

Jake doesn’t come home for lunch. Jeremy answers a few emails, gets depressed when he sees the grade from his Music Theory final (‘82%. Good, but lacks heart’) and accidentally sleeps through Jazz and Improvisation. Michael calls him after to make sure he’s okay, and Jeremy tries to sound like his performance anxiety is not steadily accelerating towards its peak at the speed of light, but he must do a terrible job because Michael shows up outside his door twenty minutes later holding a thermos of hot chocolate, a bag of McDonald’s, and all of his sheet music for the concert. (“You know you don’t have to do all this. I can take care of myself,” Jeremy mutters, trying not to be distracted by the pink flush settling over Michael’s ears and nose from the cold.

“I know,” Michael laughs, pulling off his gloves and working the circulation back into his hands. “I just like knowing you’re safe.”)

Jake doesn’t come home for dinner. Jeremy carefully buttons his white dress shirt and slips on the jazz band’s atrocious uniform vest, an ugly, boxy, sky blue thing covered in sequins. He tightens his tie, looks in the mirror, and considers calling Jake to ask if he needs to find another ride.

A half hour goes by with no sign of Jake. Jeremy packs up his sheet music, does a few quick Google searches on his phone regarding bus schedules, and catches a shuttle that will take him downtown.

Jeremy arrives at the theater with fifteen minutes to spare. The band is already warming up, and he
quickly stumbles onstage, shedding his coat and gloves. Michael waves at him cheerfully from beside a grand piano, bass settled low over his shoulders. Rich is messing with a hi-hat a few feet behind him.

Michael reaches over and clunks a low, rumbling chord on the grand piano as Jeremy approaches. “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the stage...Mr. Jeremiah Heere!”

“Shut up, dude, I’m not that late.” He sets his music on the piano and raises the piano bench, making sure his disproportionately long legs aren’t in danger of bumping the bottom of the grand piano. It’s a beautiful instrument, glossy black and reflective with silky smooth keys, and he wants to be as gentle as possible with it out of respect for the craftsmanship. Also he recognizes the brand and he knows that the retail price of the piano costs about six figures more than most people earn in their lifetime and really can’t afford to damage anything.

“Dude, you’re so late. Everyone was supposed to be here a half hour ago.” Michael takes his bass off and places it into a guitar stand by the drum set.

“Yeah, but the concert doesn’t start for another fifteen minutes, so. I win.”

“Sure. As long as you’re ready to rock this audience’s world, dude. I hear we’re sold out tonight.”

Jeremy glances out into the darkness beyond the stage lights where he can barely make out rows and rows of empty chairs repeating back into nothingness. He can’t see the back wall no matter how hard he squints and feels a sharp pang of fear twist his stomach. Oh God. There has to be thousands of seats out there, with a full house there’d be thousands and thousands of eyes on him, he’s never gonna be able to play like this--

“Whoa, Jer, buddy, pal, you good?” Michael crouches down to Jeremy’s eye level. “Are you sick? Damn, I knew you looked off earlier, do you need water or something?”

Jeremy shakes his head, snapping his gaze away from the empty theater. “I’m good. Just, please let’s not focus on how many people are gonna be here? Or anything? I’m a little freaked out, full disclosure. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Oh, shit, yeah, my bad. Other things to talk about, uh…” Michael places a hand over his stomach, tugging at the buttons on his vest. “Have I ever told you how much I hate these vests? The sequins make me feel like a chubby fish.”

“Bet.” Jeremy looks across the band, determined to prove Michael wrong. None of the saxophones are pulling off the look. Even Chloe looks uncomfortable in the uniform. He glances back farther, skimming over the bari sax player and the trombone section, risking a quick look up to the trumpets, hoping he doesn’t accidentally-- fuck. He accidentally locks eyes with Jake, who actually looks pretty dashing in his ugly blue vest. Jeremy waves, a tiny, half hearted gesture, expecting Jake to ignore him again. To his surprise, Jake waves back, wearing a guilty, apologetic grin. He mouths something that looks like “Katamari,” and Jeremy tilts his head, confused. “Katamari? What?” Jeremy mouths back, scrunching his nose.
Jake rolls his eyes and raises a hand to his temple. "‘I’m sorry,’ not ‘katamari.’" He holds Jeremy’s gaze for a second longer, smiling tentatively, before he holds up a hand, miming ‘hold on’ as he kneels down and digs around in a bag near his feet. Jeremy follows the motion and notices an empty trumpet stand resting beside Jake’s music stand, obscuring his view of whatever Jake is trying to find.

Finally pulling something from the depths of his bag, Jake extends a hand towards Jeremy. A small package sits in his palm, impeccably wrapped in dark green paper.

Jeremy freezes. The box is incredibly small. It kind of looks like... well, if he had to guess-- Michael notices him go still and follows his gaze to Jake, who is still cradling the tiny box like it’s a baby bird. “What the fuck?” Michael breathes out, and moves a step closer to Jeremy. “What’s your man doing, dude?”

“I...don’t…” Jeremy trails off as Jake motions him over.

Jeremy shakes his head.

Jake waves him over again, more insistent.

Jeremy shakes his head again, more firmly.

Jake shrugs and starts to make his way over to Jeremy, tripping slightly over his trumpet stand.

He should really move that before someone actually falls, Jeremy thinks vaguely, starting to freak out.

Jake rights himself and takes another step closer, squeezing past another trumpet player.

“Not now! Later!” he mouths to Jake, who stops in his tracks. He’s feeling his anxiety start to spike, an unpleasant chill traveling down his spine. What the fuck? This is the worst possible time Jake could have picked to do...whatever the fuck he’s trying to do right now, Jeremy needs to focus on the concert that’s going to start any minute now, what--

Jake suddenly falls to one knee and Jeremy feels his stomach drop.

Beside him, Michael gasps a highly audible “What the fuck?” as Jeremy feels his anxiety skyrocket, his heart rate tripling and his palms going clammy. What the fuck, he thinks hazily, what is happening? Am I still asleep on the bus? This can’t be happening, I’m too young to get married, we’ve only been dating for four months, I’m not even in l--

Jake tucks the box back into the bag by his feet and stands up, dusting imaginary dirt off of his slacks.

Oh.

Okay. Jeremy slumps forward, relieved, and starts to talk at the same moment as Michael:

“Oh, oh my God, I thought--”

“Thank Christ, I really--”

Michael and Jeremy both let out a confused laugh.

“Man,” Michael runs a hand backwards through his hair, dark waves flowing between his fingers, “is it bad that I got, like, legitimately scared you were being proposed to like half a second ago?”
“No, no, oh my God, I thought the same thing, dude,” Jeremy replies, staring hard at the music in front of him. Suddenly his music-anxiety doesn’t seem half bad in comparison to the absolute terror he has just been subjected to.

“That would be such a shitty time to propose to someone. At a jazz band concert. Jesus.”

“Right? Oh my God,” Jeremy repeats, feeling his body start to flood with post-existential terror endorphins. “I have never been that scared in my entire life. That’s the worst thing that has ever happened to me onstage.” He looks back over at Jake, who is running scales, completely oblivious to the fact that he almost gave Jeremy a heart attack.

“Any proposal that involves matching sequined vests is a proposal doomed to fail,” Michael says, mock-serious, tapping his temple wisely.

“Oh my God.” Jeremy says for the millionth time that hour, and shoves Michael towards his bass as the theater doors open and people start to take their seats. Reyes quickly reminds everyone of the performance order before turning to welcome the crowd, giving a brief introduction of the college and the class itself. Jeremy doesn’t listen. Normally, it’d be around now that he’d be starting to panic, hands going numb and shaky, losing his breath, but after being scared halfway into the next week, he’s feeling surprisingly calm. Having Michael directly to his right keeping him grounded and pointing out amusing people in the audience definitely helps, too (“Bro, this lady is straight up wearing a fox as a scarf, I swear to God, look, look, fourth row,” and “Dude, is that Keanu Reeves?” and “Shit! George Clooney again! The man just can’t resist the Magnificent Mell…”).

Jeremy tries hard not to laugh out loud, but knows he’s smiling like a dork at all of Michael’s off-the-cuff comments. Michael’s grinning back at him, too, eyes crinkled up beneath his big square glasses, appallingly sequined vest glittering under the lights. Reyes steps onto the podium, calling for attention, and Michael shoots him one last smile as he rolls his sleeves up to the elbow.

Jeremy gives him a questioning look and stares pointedly at his exposed forearms.

Michael leans in and whispers out of the corner of his mouth, “Gotta roll up the sleeves to play. That’s where the groove lives. You can’t trap the groove with sleeves.”

Jeremy stifles his laughter so intensely that he misses the downbeat of the first song, and has to play catch-up for a full two measures. He should probably be mad at Michael for distracting him, but Michael sends him a small, smug, terrifically fond grin and Jeremy melts. He melts so hard that he’s sure it can be heard in the music, his left hand line going sweet and buttery and liquid-mellow beneath the mellophone solo that Jake’s rocking from the other side of the stage.

Jeremy doesn’t look over, doesn’t acknowledge the message in Jake’s music. Instead, he watches Michael as he plays, the way he tilts his chin up when Jeremy hits a particularly good chord, or how he sticks his tongue out and mutters “yeah, damn,” when Rich backs off and lets him run away with the tempo a little during an impromptu bass solo, the way his tight vest stops a little too high on the curve of his stomach, leaving an inch or so of white dress shirt visible at the bottom that Jeremy can’t help but want to touch. The longer he plays, the deeper he gets lost in Michael’s music. This isn’t new to Jeremy; he’s used to getting washed away in Michael’s bass line. This time, though, something has changed, because Michael is falling into Jeremy’s music, too, mellowing his tone and indulging Jeremy’s tendency to sweep too far into arpeggios, opening his wrist to really let the
vibrato ring through the theater, echoing off the balcony, the way Michael’s longing to be heard.
Jeremy pushes subtly into Michael’s line, thinking back to their composition project, asking gently “What were you hiding from me? What didn’t you want me to know?”

Michael pries back, a little too smug for Jeremy’s taste. “You tell me, dude.”

Jeremy smiles and comp chords, trading little snippets of music with Michael, pushing until he gets pushed back, slowly and unintentionally leading the band into a push-pull ebb-flow sort of pulse, gentle and caring.

Reyes feels the band pull out of his control, following Michael, and raises a warning eyebrow in the bassist’s direction. Michael’s too busy looking at Jeremy to notice.

Jeremy lifts his hands off the keys with a flourish, throwing his head back and barely containing a joyful laugh. He’s never had this much fun while playing piano. Especially not piano in front of an audience.

I should get scared to death more often, Jeremy thinks warmly, staring up into the stage lights. He has never played this well before, but now, with Michael? They’re on a whole new level of musicianship, playing like they’re the same person, anticipating each other’s every move. He thinks he could get used to it.

“Seven songs down, one to go!” Michael whispers excitedly, pretending to tune his bass so he can lean closer to Jeremy. “This is fucking amazing!”

Jeremy nods discreetly, afraid to speak and disturb the heady, electric feeling settling in the air between him and Michael. Reyes steps off his podium and picks up a microphone, waving a dismissive hand towards the band. The wind players stand up and start to gather their music.

“Hello, everyone. We’ve got one more song for you tonight before we wrap up the show and send you all home so you can enjoy the rest of your Christmas Eve. Our final piece of the night is a quartet that I’m sure everyone here is familiar with-- “When I Fall In Love,” featuring Jake Dillinger on the trumpet,” Jake raises a hand towards the audience, grinning as he hands his mellophone off to a saxophonist walking offstage, “Rich Goranski on the drums, Michael Mell on the bass, and finally Jeremy Heere on the piano. While we get set up, I’d like to thank everyone once again for coming out tonight--” Jeremy tunes Reyes out, focusing on the sheet music on the piano in front of him. Everything’s gone smoothly so far. Better than smooth. More like unbelievable. More like mind-blowingly amazing. He just has to get through one last song. Almost there.

Michael gives him a subtle thumbs-up and mouths, “You’re doing great!” as he bends down to readjust his amp. Jeremy resolutely avoids staring at his ass. Rich rifles through a stick bag and pulls out some brushes. The rest of the band starts to shuffle offstage, leaving the quartet suddenly alone on a stage that seems much bigger than it had only a few moments ago.

Jeremy’s startled by a loud thud and a metallic clanging noise and quickly glances up to see that a fourth trumpet leaving the stage has somehow managed to trip over Jake and fall off a riser. Nice.

Reyes finally finishes rambling into his microphone and turns to Jeremy, who is supposed to start the quartet with a small solo.

Acting entirely out of habit, Jeremy looks to Jake for reassurance, but can’t see him over the lid of
the piano. He must be leaning over or picking something off of the ground. Probably dropped his music when the other trumpet tripped. Still in need of a confidence boost, he turns to look at Michael, who crosses his eyes and sticks out his tongue before tapping Jeremy on the shoulder. The touch is brief and barely-there, but leaves Jeremy feeling like he’s been hit by a bolt of lightning. He’s insanely keyed up, on the edge, up the wall, lost in the music, and, for the first time in his life, actually excited to play a song in front of an audience.

Jeremy grins, a touch maniacally, a touch hysterically, and settles his hands onto the piano. Reyes shoots him a quick nod and raises his arms, prepping for the downbeat.

Jeremy breathes in deeply once, and then again. Reyes flicks his wrist up.

The downbeat falls in what feels like slow motion, and then Jeremy is playing.

He trusts his muscle memory and gets through his mini-solo just fine, fingers falling in memorized, smooth patterns. Michael drops in with a simple quarter note pulse, keeping Jeremy’s tempo relaxed. The theater’s grand piano is ringing clearly, a warm, broad tone that leaves him feeling giddy as he passes into the eighth measure of the song. He feels much freer now that he’s not being played over by the rest of the band, and takes a few improvisational risks, testing his limits. He’s flying high. He’s the best damn pianist this theater has ever seen, he can feel it in the bounceback of the piano’s keys, the soft pressure of the pedals, the slick surface of the ivory notes. He leans into the bridge, adding some extra glitz, imagining the music winding towards the ceiling in lazy, glittering golden spirals, imbuing the song with the fragile crystalline tinkle of wine glasses and the shine of diamond earrings and silk black ties. It feels romantic and intimate and showy and fun.

God bless Bill Evans.

Everything’s going smoothly so far, even better than they’ve rehearsed it. He’s set Jake up for a fantastic entrance, setting the bar high only because he knows Jake will be able to handle it. He plays a lilting pattern up the piano, thinking vaguely of golden chandeliers and red velvet carpet before backing off the solo, waiting for Jake to drop in in four, three, two...now.

Or...Three, two, and now.

Okay, so Jake’s a measure late. No big deal. He glances over at Michael, who has resorted to hedging a simple walking bass line. He looks back at Jeremy and shrugs, equally confused. Rich, apparently uncomfortable with the void in the music, adds a few quiet fills and stares desperately at Reyes, who is trying to subtly cue Jake in with the start of every new measure. Jeremy can’t see the trumpet section very well from where he’s sitting, so he ducks his head and squints between the body of the piano and its lid, vamping a quarter note chord pattern with his left hand.

Jake briefly catches his eye, and Jeremy stumbles over his chord progression because his boyfriend looks like he can’t decide whether to be pissed off or totally panicking. He’s holding his trumpet gingerly, trying to communicate something to Reyes. Jeremy thinks maybe he’s hurt or having some totally unprecedented stage fright until he squints harder and realizes that Jake’s not playing for a reason-- he’s holding a broken instrument. Worse than broken. His trumpet is totally unplayable. Oh, shit, the realization hits Jeremy like an unexpected D.C. al coda, the fourth trumpet player hadn’t tripped over Jake. He’d tripped over Jake’s instrument.

A second, third, and fourth realization follow quickly behind the first. Jake had handed off his mellophone and didn’t have a spare horn onstage. The rest of the band is already either backstage or out of the building getting drunk in one of the many skeezy local bars, so no one can get him a spare trumpet. Their quartet had suddenly become a trio.

Jeremy can feel himself panicking, losing his cool, looking first to Reyes and then to Michael for guidance. Reyes keeps conducting, a resigned look on his face. Michael looks frozen, still vamping
the same four bars. Jeremy looks back at Reyes. “What do we do?” he mouths, nervous.

Reyes hunches his shoulders and shrugs at Jake apologetically before staring back at Jeremy. “Solo,” he mouths.

“What?”

“Solo! Now!” Reyes pointedly cues a downbeat in Jeremy’s direction.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck--Jeremy repeats back to the beginning of the song on instinct. He’s improv soloed before, yeah, but never a whole song live in front of a huge crowd with no notice, he can feel the eyes of the audience pinning him to the piano bench, how many people are out there? Thousands at the least. Thousands and thousands of people watching Jeremy solo onstage, live, probably even more watching online, he can’t get away with even the tiniest mistake, someone will notice and point it out and he’ll be a laughingstock-- no, just keep playing, he’s practiced this a million times, he knows exactly what to do except what is he gonna do when he reaches the end of the prepared solo? What if he screws up, oh God, he’s totally gonna screw up and then he’ll be pushed out of the jazz community permanently this time, Jeremy Heere, the worst pianist of the century, it’s his greatest fear come to life--

Nope. Be chill. He’s not gonna panic. He is going to sit here and play this damn solo if it kills him. Which it might. Because his chest is starting to ache, actually, and his hands are trembling, is he having a heart attack? Those are signs of a heart attack, maybe. He can’t have a heart attack onstage, what if somebody records it and puts it on the internet, oh God, oh God, he’s going to screw up any second now, his hands are getting steadily sweatier, slipping off the keys, and the piano--the piano is turning on him, it knows he isn’t any good, it’s pushing back, the notes sound wrong? Why are they wrong?

The rising tide of his terror threatens to sweep Jeremy away, and he stumbles over the keys, slipping out of the melody into a wrong chord, and then another, okay, he’s okay, just get back into the progression, that’s all he has to do. Except he can’t find the progression anymore, every note he hits sounds wrong, he plays an off-balance chromatic, a desperate, reaching scale, and even that sounds God-awful, he can’t find the beat, he can’t get the chords, he’s lost, he’s losing his breath, why can’t he breathe, what the fuck, there’s something squeezing painfully tight in his chest, a violent tremor tears across his body and his hands slip off the keys entirely. He presses one thin, shaking hand over his heart, the other reaching up to tug fruitlessly at his stupid tie, thinking Oh God, this is how I die, I’m having a heart attack, I can’t breathe, I’m gonna die onstage, what the fuck, what the fuck?

He’s startled slightly out of his panic by Michael, who salvages the solo by playing the totally wrong song. He’s still playing something Evans-y, but it is definitely not “When I Fall in Love.” It takes Jeremy a few more bars to place it as “Someday My Prince Will Come,” by which time he’s calmed down enough to be able to breathe. He’s still shaking like a leaf, but he isn’t in danger of passing out anymore. Michael looks over at him, wide-eyed and concerned. He plays a short arpeggio, clearly trying to ask if Jeremy’s alright.

Jeremy puts a jittery hand back onto the keyboard and plays a simple chord progression, hoping Michael can hear his tentative “I’m okay. Thanks.”

Michael nods, relieved, and looks back to Reyes, picking out a riff that’s a little too funky for Evans. Jeremy rolls his shoulders, willing himself to relax, and plays a hesitant strain of “When I Fall In Love” in Michael’s new key, trying to get the bassist back on track. He feels the bass waver for a moment, can tell Michael’s debating whether to yield to Jeremy or keep playing the wrong song, before Michael straightens his back and pushes hard into the bass line.
“Are you kidding me?” Jeremy thinks disbelievingly at Michael, playing a displeased augmented chord. “I almost die onstage and you’re gonna make this harder for me?”

Michael looks back at him, an apologetic half-smile in place as he riffs on the main melody. “I panicked, dude. Had to play something. Just comp for me?”

It’s Jeremy’s turn to waver. He could comp chords for Michael’s solo, no problem. Relax. Ride out the end of whatever fit just hit him a second ago. Just him and Rich, laying down a solid accompaniment. Michael soloing over top. Jeremy in the background. Jeremy the accompanist. Jeremy who barely survives onstage. Jeremy who’s never gonna get to be the cool jazz soloist. Yeah, he could do that. But he suddenly realizes he doesn’t really want to. He’s already fucked up the song, and before that, his entire jazz career. He hadn’t wanted a jazz career anyways. What more does he have to lose?

Jeremy feels all of his panic dissipate in the space of a measure. He sits up, noticing vaguely that his hands have stopped shaking. Michael’s still looking at him, waiting for him to start a legitimate accompaniment.

Jeremy finds the contrapuntal scale, picks a major sixth, and presses it down deliberately, looking Michael dead in the eyes. “No. You comp for me.”

He draws out a melodic, melancholy line over Michael’s distinctly funk-fusion interpretation of Evans. The lines clash for a second before Michael draws back and switches chords, changing songs again with a slightly surprised “Make me, dude.”

“Maybe I will,” Jeremy replies, following Michael into “Waltz for Debby” and spinning it quickly into “My Romance” with a showy waltz twirl. He finds himself letting his guard down, adding a flirty little swing to the music, running his fingers through the melody like it’s silk, or velvet, or maybe Michael’s dark, wavy hair.

Maybe it’s the relief he’s feeling in the aftermath of a near-death experience, or the resulting roguish looseness of his tie, but Jeremy’s feeling daring. He dips low into the music, playing a few short grace notes, playing circles around Michael. Sure, he’s in front of an audience, his boyfriend is on the same stage as him, but he can’t bring himself to care. Right now, he’s only focused on the music, trading phrases with Michael, working through his entire Bill Evans repertoire, dancing along the edge of something red-hot and electric building in the music between the two of them.

Michael falls into his lowest range, tone sugar-sweet and warm, only the barest hint of restraint left in his playing, glazing over Jeremy’s tremolos before fading into something impressionistic and full of fourths, mirroring the way the stage lights reflect off the piano and coat the ivory keys in a golden wash. Jeremy follows the switch smoothly, experimentally drawing Michael into a soft rallentando, asking “Debussy? I thought you hated Romantic composers.”

“Romantic with a capital R? Yeah, that I’m not a fan of. But I can get into romance.” Michael takes Jeremy’s rallentando and leans into it heavily, building to a peak that he recognizes as the first duet they ever played together. They reach the top of the build at the same instant and lock eyes, feeling the electricity that’s building between them reach a critical point, teetering on the edge of disaster or genius.

They pause for a split second.

Jeremy looks at Michael, really looks at him, in his stupid too-tight sequined vest, his dress shirt rolled up to the elbows, his dark hair falling in gentle waves over his ears, his beautiful, idiotic, smitten grin, and thinks “Fuck it.”
Jeremy lets go.

He closes his eyes and leans back, diving headfirst into their cheesy little composition project, but this time he doesn’t hold anything back. His heart aches with the sheer magnitude of emotion he’s trying to force through the music until he realizes that he’s shaking again, but he can’t stop now because if he stops he’ll never get the courage to start again, so he presses harder into the keys, barely noticing when Michael falters and stops playing, he’s too busy frantically running his hands up the piano, building and building towards something he doesn’t recognize until a dam bursts open in his chest and he stands up, pushing the piano bench back, running into a key change as he opens his eyes and stares hopelessly at Michael, thinking “I think I love you, please don’t hate me,” and Michael stares back at him, slack-jawed and still, listening to the sound of Jeremy’s heart pour out of the keyboard, so honest and powerful that it lingers in the air, coloring the lights a warm yellow-gold and settling over the stage, too heavy to fully dissipate. The sound of Jeremy’s love permeates the auditorium, making itself known in the space between chords, in the slope of Michael’s shoulders underneath his guitar strap, in the rise and fall of the sostenuto pedal, in the soft orange glint of the light off of Michael’s hair, in the twirling, shimmering, ecstatic, blissful music Jeremy’s weaving in front of this unsuspecting audience, on this too-big stage under the too-bright lights.

Jeremy runs a glissando up the keyboard, awed and open and bright and glittering and overwhelmed, thinking of ugly cars, 7-11 slushies, vintage records, Michael singing Chet Baker, Michael cooking his mom’s recipes, Michael bringing him coffee, Michael playing Pastorius songs, Michael carrying him to the hospital, Michael, Michael, Michaelmichaelmichaelmichael until his music is practically bursting at the seams, running itself ragged, and he falls back slightly, realizing Michael hasn’t responded.

He stops fully, then, the silence ringing louder than a gunshot as he looks at his best friend hopelessly. He lifts his hands off the piano, unsure if he should apologize or run away or laugh it off or--

Michael breaks into the solo line, music just as desperately passionate. It sounds like late night phone calls, cold hands, old out-of-tune pianos, Jeremy singing along to every song in Michael’s car, Jeremy with snowflakes in his eyelashes, Jeremy opening the door with sleep-mussed hair and bleary eyes, Jeremy drinking wine and losing at video games, Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremyjeremyjeremy and then finally “Of course I love you, how could I not,” and Jeremy’s heart swells painfully and he falls back into the song, playing in unison with Michael, scaling up the keys, reveling in the pure shock and joy arcing between the piano and the bass as they build to a finish because finally, finally they’re on the same page, and it feels like, for once, he isn’t lost. For once, Jeremy is where he’s meant to be.

The last note rings out, straight major like a beam of light off a sunrise, and echoes through the auditorium.

A pause.

A breath.
The audience moves as one, rocketing to its feet and screaming, applauding thunderously as Jeremy lets his hands fall from the keyboard.

Chapter End Notes

:^)

and finally the angst has a payoff. whew. this chapter was a lot of fun to write. especially the end. feel free to yell at me in the comments or over on my tumblr @coloredpencilroses !! see y'all in the next chapter !!!!!

(p.s. pls go listen to some bill evans if you want some New, Heartachingly Beautiful Music to Enjoy!!)
After they take their (third!) set of bows in front of the ecstatic crowd, Reyes finally dismisses them with a wave of his baton and a bemused glare towards Jeremy and Michael. Jeremy’s so played out--in the most literal sense possible--that he almost doesn’t notice how utterly wrecked Jake looks from across the stage. *Almost.*

And, oh shit, that’s gonna be a situation he’s gonna have to deal with sooner or later because, wow, turns out the man Jeremy’s secretly been more than a little head-over-heels for is also not so secretly ass-over-teacup for one Jeremy Heere, which is probably a conversation they should have had out loud in real words and in private before this point.

He watches Jake hurriedly reach up to his stand, shoving sheet music into his bag by the handful. Jake’s never that careless with his things, especially his music, but Jeremy figures he’s got more than enough reason to be a little out of it right now. A broken instrument and a broken heart all in the span of less than ten minutes has got to wear on a guy. And Jeremy thinks he should probably feel a little more guilty than he’s actually feeling right now, but he’s so caught up in the unreal realization that *Michael loves him back* that it’s hard to focus on anything else. Still, when Jake vanishes offstage in a swirl of blue sequins and crumpled sheet music, Jeremy has the presence of mind to chase after him.

He shoots a halfhearted salute to the still-cheering crowd before pushing through the wall of navy velvet curtains on stage left. He stares uncomprehending into the darkness for a moment while his eyes adjust, hearing only the muffled roar of the audience and his own footsteps. He accidentally kicks something small and plastic--*a bottle of slide oil, probably*, he notes distantly, before he softly calls out “Jake?” He has no idea what he ought to say to his (ex?)boyfriend. *Sorry I just musically confessed my undying love for another man in front of you and an audience of several thousand people* doesn’t seem like the best idea, maybe.

“That’s me.” Jake’s voice comes in a cracked whisper from somewhere to his left; Jeremy can just barely make out the glint of Jake’s sequined vest in the dark.

Jeremy edges slightly closer to Jake, who he can now see well enough to pick out the tear tracks on his face. Jeremy’s Michael-centric euphoria crashes fast and crashes hard. Abruptly overwhelmed by the guilt, he clears his throat and says, “Hey, listen, man...” with no real plan for how he’s going to end the sentence.

Jake saves him the trouble. “Really, Jeremy, on Christmas? During a public performance? During a solo that was supposed to be mine? Why didn’t-- fuck, man, why couldn’t you have talked to me about this before? Do I really mean so little to you that you’re comfortable just--just tossing me aside like yesterday’s jam without even sitting down and working through this with me?”

“I don’t think old jam is a good metaphor. Normally that stuff keeps,” Jeremy says, because it’s the only thing he feels comfortable addressing in the mass of questions Jake’s thrown at him. He feels painfully, horrifically guilty, and it’s made infinitely worse by the fact that Jake is just so right about so many things. There was no reason for Jeremy to keep stringing him along when he realized his feelings for Michael, except he was maybe too anxious to bring it up to Jake and the risk of leaving a semi-stable relationship where, for the first time in forever, he actually felt cared about, seemed to outweigh the benefits by a lot. By a ton. In hindsight it’s painstakingly obvious that he should have
done so many things so differently, but there’s no way he can just--

“Really? You’re gonna pick apart my metaphor now? That’s all you got out of that?” Jake starts to head towards the eerie green glow of the exit sign.

“No! God, Jake, I’m so, so sorry. There’s-- I have no excuse for myself. I should have told you. I shouldn’t have led you on. I know. You’re right and I’m wrong and I didn’t--I didn’t do anything right and I’m just so, so sorry. I just-- I made dumb decisions and I’m so sorry your trumpet broke and I’m sorry Michael and I stole your solo and I’m sorry that happened in front of everybody. And on Christmas. I’m really. I’m so sorry. I...if there’s anything I can do...I guess..” Jeremy trails off, unsure. Jake’s standing with his back to Jeremy in front of the exit, clutching his bag, hair green-black in the dim light. Inexplicably, he starts to laugh.

“We could have saved so much time. You realize that? If you just-- told me, when you realized, we could have both been a lot happier, I think.”

“I know. I know, you’re right, I’m so sorry.” Jeremy scuffs his dress shoes against the floor. “Is-- can we still be friends? I understand if you don’t want to, but-- I still really care about you, you know--”

Another half-hearted laugh from Jake. “I don’t know. I want to say yes, but you’re-- you’re really gonna have to let me think about this. Fuck, I know we didn’t always get along, but, damnit, Jeremy, I really cared about you. Care about you. Still. I just wish you would have talked to me so I didn’t have to find out like this.”

“Are you mad?”

“Of course I’m mad. My boyfriend just announced his love for another man onstage, that’s not really how I like to spend my holidays. Even if nobody besides I and Mell got it, it still sucked.”

“That’s fine, that’s understandable. I’m so sorry.”

“Christ. I don’t think I’ve ever heard two people play together like that. Not even you and me. At least you shattered my heart in pursuit of true love or whatever.”

“I wouldn’t call it true love, maybe--”

“Shut up. Shut up, just, shut up--” Jake’s voice pitches up curiously before he cuts off in what Jeremy realizes is a poorly-concealed sob.

“Jake...” he says, voice cracking in the middle of the word.

“I got this for you, but I don’t think I should really give it to you anymore. Merry Christmas anyway,” Jake chokes out, voice distressed and distressing, before he reaches into his bag and tosses something small into the trashcan by the door with a quiet thunk.

A quick glance at his phone confirms the time; just past midnight on Christmas morning. “I don’t really celebrate it, but, uh, thanks. You too.” Jeremy says, but when he looks up Jake has disappeared through the exit and out into the snow.

Jeremy considers following him, but can’t imagine what he would do other than continue to apologize. Instead, he takes a few steps forward and, glancing around to confirm he’s still alone backstage, plunges his hand into the trash to retrieve-- the tiny box Jake was holding earlier. A wave of guilt washes over him again. He really, really hopes Jake wasn’t actually planning on proposing.

When he pries open the top, he’s presented not with a ring-- thank fuck-- but instead with a small
silver key and a folded piece of paper. Jeremy leaves the key and clumsily unfolds the paper with shaking hands to find a piece of trumpet sheet music; closer inspection reveals it to be the second page of a brass arrangement of the *Jurassic Park* theme. He’s confused until he flips it over to find the back of the sheet’s been filled with Jake’s unmistakeably careful handwriting.

*Deere Jeremy Heere*, the note reads, *I know you don’t really do Christmas, but I figure it can’t hurt to get you something. It’s getting me something too, kinda. This thing is, I’m getting really fuckin’ tired of sleeping in your freezing dorm. And, seeing as we’ve been cohabitating on and off for a couple of months and the dorms are about to close for the winter… would you do me the honor of moving into my shitty tiny apartment? It may be small, but at least it’s got a kitchen and a space heater. And me ;). How about it? Love, Your Sometimes-An-Asshole, Often-An-Idiot, Always-Stupidly-In-Love Boyfriend Jakey-D.*

Jeremy’s heart clenches and he closes his hand around the note. It crumples in his his sweaty fist and he goes to push open the door against his better judgement when he hears a soft “Jeremy?” from the entrance of the stage.

He whips around, startled, but it’s just Michael standing there.

*Just Michael. Understatement of the century.*

“Oh! Hey! Hi!” Jeremy says, a little overenthusiastic, a little frozen in place.

“Hey!” Michael says back at him, equally startled and overenthusiastic. A beat passes in silence and Michael shoots him a pair of finger guns.

“So I just--” “Man, what a performance--” they start at the same time, and then stop. They both laugh nervously before Michael passes a hand over his eyes and says “So how about that performance, huh? Jeremy Heere, back in the jazz business!”

“Heh. All thanks to you. I couldn’t have pulled it together out there if you hadn’t filled in for me.”

“Yeah, were you okay? Are you okay? Things seemed pretty bad there for a few measures. I was worried.” Michael finally takes a few steps towards Jeremy, maybe a few steps too many, because he’s close and he’s just barely infringing on Jeremy’s space. Jeremy can’t find it in himself to care too much, though, when Michael’s looking him over, concerned and careful and so, so soft.

“Yes. Yeah, I’m fine, thanks,” he breathes out, trying to ignore the familiar smell of Michael’s hair gel. Except why is he ignoring it now? He’s single now, totally single, very recently single, and if he heard what he thought he heard in the music, Jeremy doesn’t need to try and hide his feelings anymore.

“Good. I’m glad.” Michael says, amused, and takes another half-step towards Jeremy. Jeremy takes a half-step back on instinct and jumps when his shoulder blades touch the door behind him. “So. About that performance--”

“It was a good one, for sure,” Jeremy says, his voice no more than a half-whisper.

“I’d call it more than good. Now, I think we’re both on the same page here, but, just-- just to make sure-- is this okay?” Michael reaches out and gently runs his fingers along Jeremy’s jaw, slow and undemanding and patient.

Jeremy’s still got Jake’s note and key clenched in his hand. He feels the steel of the door pressed against his back, the hard metal of the key pressed into his palm, the winter air outside seeping through the door to send a chill up his spine. The cold door’s against his back, but Michael’s
standing close against his front, hair coming ungelled in a soft wave, too-small sequined vest pulled tight across the soft arc of his belly, big hand resting warm and tender and soft, soft, soft on the too-sharp line of Jeremy’s jaw.

Michael just stands there, waiting.

Jeremy takes one last look at the vest, the hair, the broad shoulders, the rolled-up sleeves, the big glasses, Michael’s warm brown eyes, and makes his decision.

He drops Jake’s note and key into the trashcan and hooks a hand into Michael’s vest. “This is more than okay.” He watches Michael’s gaze flicker down to his lips, then back up. Well, he’s gone this far already. Why not a little further. “Hey, Michael..?!”

“Yeah?” Michael asks, dropping his hand and taking another step forward until they’re pressed chest-to-chest. He raises an arm and presses it to the door over Jeremy’s head, effectively pinning him, but the gesture isn’t threatening or forceful. It just makes Jeremy feel safe, secure somehow, surrounded by Michael’s warmth, where the rest of the world can’t quite reach him.

Jeremy wets his lips, and reaches up to place a hand on the back of Michael’s neck. “I think I’d like to kiss you, if that’s alright.”

“Oh, Jer…” Michael flashes him a brilliant grin, the best kind of smile he’s got in his arsenal, where his eyes squint shut and his nose crinkles across the bridge and his dimples come out full-force.”You don’t have to tell me twice.”

And then his lips are on Jeremy’s. It starts slow, a little hesitant, a little over-careful, but Jeremy melts against the door behind him all the same. Michael presses forwards in response, leaning his full weight against Jeremy as he deepens the kiss, when Jeremy becomes suddenly aware of a blast of frigid air and the distinctly odd sensation that the wall behind him has disappeared. He snaps his eyes open and flails for purchase on the edge of the doorframe, but his reflexes kick in a second too late and he falls backwards through the open door into a drift of snow. Michael lands on top of him with a quiet oof.

“Oh...damn, dudes, sorry--” A freshman trombone player stands above them, confused and embarrassed, still holding the door open. “Hey, I know y’all are pretty busy right now, but, have either of you seen my slide oil? Think I left it--back--in there-- hey, aren’t you dating Dillinger?” The kid points at Jeremy accusingly, but Jeremy just throws his head back into the snow and laughs a little.

“No. Not anymore. That ship has sailed. And your slide oil--” Jeremy gasps and covers it with another laugh as Michael, who is still laying half on top of him, presses an unexpected kiss to the underside of his jaw,”--your stuff is still inside, so maybe go get it?”

The little freshman makes a face at the PDA and scurries inside.

“Bye!” Michael calls after him as the door swings shut.

Jeremy takes advantage of his distraction and plants a quick kiss on Michael’s cheek before squirming out from under him. “This weather is fuckin’ freezing, dude, let’s get outta here.”

“Sounds good to me. Want to go back to mine? It’s too late for the buses and I, eh, kinda want to talk? About some stuff. You know, face to face. Is that okay?”

“Of course. Except,” Jeremy says, standing up and pulling Michael to his feet, “I expect there to be wine and Super Smash Brothers afterwards.”
“Oh, man, there’s no way we don’t do that. It’s a tradition for us, practically. Now c’mon, I’m just parked over here.” Michael gestures to his left and, yep, there’s his ugly P.T. Cruiser convertible, the top actually up for once in response to the winter weather. “Also, hold on one sec, I know you’ve gotta be cold after laying in the snow, here--”

He rummages around in the back seat of the Cruiser before he emerges with his red hoodie. He shoves it at Jeremy’s chest. “Here, put this on. You look like a drowned kitten, dude.”

“Oh, man, I’m gonna get it all wet, I can’t--and what about you? Won’t you be cold? And what about your bass--isn’t that still inside?”

“Oh, okay,” Michael smiles, “I couldn’t care less if you get my jacket wet, it’s there to keep people warm, I’ve got more extra padding than you’ve got anyways so I’ll be okay, and fuck it, I’ll grab my shit tomorrow.”

Jeremy can’t argue with that, so he swings into the passenger seat, shivering slightly, as Michael starts the car and turns the heater up full blast. The radio turns on automatically and, of course, of course, they’re just in time to catch a soft piano opening and then it’s Chet Baker all over again.

“Time after time--” Jeremy quotes in time with Chet’s velvety voice, a little bemused, a little puzzled, and a lot of some warm, liquid gold feeling he can’t quite pin down.

“--I tell myself that I’m. . .so lucky to be loving you,” Michael quotes back at him with a vulnerable half-smile. Jeremy shivers again, but this time he doesn’t think it’s the cold.

Suddenly overwhelmed, Jeremy reaches out to take Michael’s hand. “I just want you to know that I’ve-- I’ve wanted this, I’ve cared about you-- for so long. For so long, man. Ever since you cooked for me and beat me at videogames and told me about being chill, I’ve been thinking about this on at least some level--”

“Oh, man, are you kidding me? I’ve been pining after you for forever. I’ve had it bad.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely--”

Jeremy leans his head against the window of Michael’s car and listens to the rise and fall of his voice as they pull out onto the empty, snow-filled street. Big fluffy flakes drift silently outside the car, glowing gold where they’re touched by the light the street lamps are throwing in wide arcs across the road. Far above, he can just barely make out the pale halo of the moon behind the clouds.

All the mistakes he’s made, the dumb things he’s done, all the time he’s wasted getting to this point seem suddenly unimportant to Jeremy. He thinks about music and Michael and the piano and snow and the bass and cheap wine and videogames and sleepy car rides and jazz and can’t bring himself to regret anything that’s brought him to this point, where he can hold Michael’s hand on Christmas and sit in his car and listen to his radio and go to his apartment and have it be okay. He’s okay. Everything’s okay, and Jeremy Heere thinks he’s exactly where he’s meant to be.

Michael must catch the watery shine in his eyes as they drive under another streetlight, and he tugs softly on Jeremy’s hand. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah. Yeah, more than alright,” Jeremy says with a smile, quickly swiping his hand across his eyes. “So why?”
“Why what?”

“Why me? What about me would get the attention of someone so--so cool--”

“Well,” Michael says, eyes shining with affection as he pulls onto the empty, snowy street, “it’s a pretty long story, but I think it all started when this skinny kid wandered into my Jazz and Improv class…”

They drive on through the snow. Michael talks, Jeremy listens, and Chet Baker does what he does best: croons something timeless and jazzy about being in love.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, first of all, the song and title for this chapter is Chet Baker's "Time After Time" cause I think it's fitting. Secondly.......7 months later.......Jeez I am so sorry this took so long, but THANK YOU!!! to everyone who read this as it went along and supported it and said so many wonderful things about it, it really means so much to me!! Thank you thank you thank you!!! I've had a blast writing this and reading everybody's comments and talking to everyone-- if you want to prompt me, want updates, or just want to say hi, come find me on coloredpencilroses on tumblr!! Thanks so much for reading <3

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