Second Star to the Right (and Straight on 'Til Morning)

by elderkevinmckinley

Summary

When the Elders of District Nine all take a big reunion trip to Disney World seven years after returning home, Kevin and Connor are forced to confront themselves, their pasts and each other.
"Three more hours to go," Kevin muttered under his breath as he glanced down at his watch to check the time.

He was on an overcrowded airplane full of tired, screaming children who were entirely too excited to be going from Salt Lake City to Orlando. They were on their way to Disney World—home of Mickey Mouse, Epcot and all things bright and magical.

"Daddy?" The small child sitting next to him asked innocently. "How many more minutes 'til we get to Disney World?"
Kevin couldn’t help the smile that bloomed on his face as he looked down at his little girl. His daughter loved everything Disney—from Mickey Mouse to *Frozen* and everything in between. A child truly after his own heart.

The little girl seated beside him had chestnut brown hair, just like her dad’s, but her eyes were a startling green like her mother’s. She had on a pint-sized sweatshirt with Minnie and Mickey on the front and was nibbling on some Cheez-Its, most of which were ending up as crumbs in her lap instead of in her belly.

“We still have about three more hours to go, hun. Why don't you try closing your eyes and getting some sleep, okay?” The rather tired dad suggested hopefully. He secretly wished she would just fall asleep so he could steal a much needed nap. He was a single dad who worked full time—good sleep was hard to come by these days.

The little girl wiped at her eyes with a tiny yawn. "But I'm not tired!"

“Oh, yeah?” Kevin scoffed, grinning knowingly at the little girl. "Then what was that yawn all about, huh?” He then proceeded to act out an over-exaggerated yawn, causing the little girl to erupt into giggles.

"Daddy!” She squealed. “That was my awake yawn!” She explained, sweetly patting Kevin on the knee. "I don't get tired, remember?"

"I remember."

Kevin placed a small kiss atop the girl’s head that was overflowing with curly locks. Another trait from her mother. The color was all Kevin though, as was most of her personality.

The older his daughter became, the more Kevin could see parts of himself in her. She was enthusiastic, head-strong, and, most importantly, always tried ardently to get her own way. She was also quite the sore loser at board games and didn’t react all that well to criticism. But, then again, she seemed to have also adopted some of Kevin’s more positive traits as well. She was incredibly smart and caring and learned things rather quickly—so quickly that her pre-school teacher had told Kevin that she was one of the brightest kids in the whole class. Her teacher had even recommended that his daughter go into the advanced kindergarten class next year. His little girl also had a certain charismatic charm about her that Kevin often wondered if she’d gotten from him as well.

"Well, how about we read you a nap-time story, huh? You know, just on the off-chance you do get tired." He reached into their little purple tote and pulled out a tattered, old children's book. "Your favorite—*Mickey Mouse and his Spaceship.*"

He’d kept all of his childhood Disney books, but this one had been his absolute favorite when he was Charlie’s age. Now, it was his daughter's favorite too.

"Yay!” Charlie cried out in joy and snuggled her little body into Kevin's side so she could see the pictures. “Will you do the voices, Daddy? Pretty please?”

“Don’t I always do the voices?”

Kevin grinned and settled into a comfortable snuggle position to read her the story. He couldn’t get quite as loud and animated as he normally would when doing the characters’ voices—considering they were on a plane with a hundred other people and all—but he still had his little girl in stitches by the end. His favorite voice to do was Goofy and it *always*, without fail, made his daughter laugh so hard her stomach practically ached.
These days, there was no sound in the universe sweeter to Kevin’s ears than the sound of his daughter’s laughter. Nothing in the entire world could possibly compare to that.

Finally, after the third read-aloud of the book, Kevin’s tired little one fell fast asleep, leaning up against his side. He brushed some of the leftover crumbs out of her lap and covered her up with a plush pink blanket. Whispering a soft goodnight into her ear, he planted a tiny little kiss to one of her freckled cheeks. Another trait from her mother. He took in a series of deep breaths, letting each one out rather slowly. It was a little trick he’d learned years ago in therapy to try and make himself relax.

Two more hours left to go until they would finally arrive in Orlando. There, he would greet all of his former missionary friends from District Nine for their big ten-day reunion trip where they’d all hang out, catch up, goof off and just enjoy some good old-fashioned Disney fun together.

The idea for the reunion was, of course, Arnold’s idea. Connor thought a trip to Hollywood might be fun and Chris “Pop-Tarts” Thomas and his husband, James Church, had suggested an Alaskan cruise, but when Kevin mentioned Orlando to the group, no one could really argue with him. Several of the former Elders had never even been to Disney World before (much to Kevin’s horror), including Chris and Connor, so when it came time to vote, it was pretty much unanimous. Naba and Arnold were bringing their little boy with them and Kevin was bringing his daughter, so it really was the perfect place to go. Even the guys who didn’t have children thought it sounded like a great idea. Besides, it was always magical to experience Disney World through the eyes of a child—no one could argue that.

Kevin honestly couldn’t wait to see everyone again. Reconnecting with all of his old mission buddies was going to be the best thing that’s happened to him in a long time—probably since his daughter was born. Between working and being a single dad, Kevin had virtually no social life other than hanging with the Cunninghams, so going to his favorite place in the whole world with his daughter and his friends—well, nothing could beat that.

Five years ago, Arnold and Nabulungi had gotten married. Naba gave birth to their son, Harrison (named after Han Solo actor Harrison Ford, of course), not long after that. They settled in a home only five houses down from Kevin in the little town of Kaysville, a quiet suburb of Salt Lake City. They lived a nice, comfortable life—Nabulungi working as a third-grade teacher and Arnold, a salesman. Harrison and Charlie got along wonderfully and were more like cousins than friends. Kevin honestly didn’t understand how Arnold hadn’t yet gotten fired from his sales job though. From what Kevin had seen of his “salesmanship” back in Uganda, Arnold couldn’t sell a damn thing without lying his ass off. He was fairly certain Arnold still lied his ass off. Kevin was honestly even looking forward to spending some quality time with Arnold, despite the fact that he literally saw him every single day of his life.

Unlike his relationship with Arnold, which seemed to be standing the test of time, two whole years had gone by since Kevin had last seen Connor McKinley—out and proud, gay as could be, sweet-to-a-fault-but-could-give-you-looks-that-could-kill-you Connor McKinley.

Kevin and Connor had quite a history together—a weird, painful, tangled mess of a history and that was one can of worms Kevin was definitely not looking forward to opening again. The problem was, every time Kevin and Connor saw each other over the years, they always opened it again. It was like clockwork. It was involuntary and loud and heartbreaking and painful.

And it was never pretty.

Sighing, he gazed down at the sleeping little girl cuddled up beside him before closing his eyes as
I don’t think the lizards like it very much when you do that,” Kevin chided his daughter as she stopped yet again at the sight of another lizard crawling around the grounds of the resort. The little girl had never seen lizards before in her life so she was intent on inspecting as many as she possibly could—always in the name of science. She held the poor little guy between her fingers as she held it up over her face, studying it curiously.

“Come on, let the lizard go, hun. It’s not nice to hold him like that.”

“But it’s science, daddy.”

“Well, we don’t have time for science right now. The Cunninghams and my other friends are all waiting for us at the hotel. Now, come on, let the poor lizard go. Look at his face, he’s tired.” And so am I.

“It’s a she and her name is Lizzy,” Charlie corrected her dad as she stared at the lizard’s little feet scampering into the air.

He smirked at Charlie as he freed the lizard forcibly from her grasp. She pouted at her dad, clearly annoyed at his blatant disrespect for science. He simply took her by the hand against her will and continued to walk down the path to the hotel lobby.

They were staying in one of the more discounted Disney Resorts since not all of the former Elders had a ton of money to spend—Kevin and Arnold included. But the Disney All-Star Movies Resort was still nice and happened to be filled with lots of amazing memories for Kevin. It’s where he had stayed with his family way back when he was a kid and they came to Disney World for the very first time. He’d never forgotten how wonderful that trip was—he just hoped his daughter would feel the same way about their first Disney trip. He wanted it to be just as magical and amazing for her as it was for him.

“Kevin!” Arnold cried out as he spotted Kevin pulling both Charlie and his giant suitcase through the lobby doors. His best friend always did that every single time he saw Kevin despite not living more than a few blocks away from him.

“Arnold!” Kevin replied, mocking him just a little. “I literally see you every day, yet you always shout my name as though you haven’t seen me in years,” he laughed, pulling his best friend into a big hug.

“Oh, get a room, you two,” Naba said with a smile as she pushed Arnold out of the way to give Kevin a hug.

As he embraced Naba and answered mundane questions about how his flight was, he caught the sight of Connor sitting alone on the lobby sofa, fiddling with the handle of his suitcase. He looked nervous. Connor then lifted his head and met Kevin’s eyes, giving the brunette a slight wave, accompanied by a weak smile. Kevin felt a sharp pain stab him in the heart as he looked into Connor’s eyes for the first time in almost two years. The last time they’d seen each other was at Davis’s wedding and, like most of the times he’d seen Connor over the past few years since their
mission ended, they hadn’t left each other on very good terms.

These days, it seemed as though they were never on good terms.

But there had been a time, back in Uganda, when Kevin and Connor were practically inseparable. Arnold might have noticed Kevin’s absence a bit more if his eyes hadn’t been glued to Nabulungi’s. But while Arnold was off wooing Nabulungi, Kevin and Connor had begun to grow closer…and closer…and closer; until finally, one day, they took it one step too far.

And everything changed after that.

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It all started about eight years ago on a typical, run-of-the-mill Tuesday afternoon for the Elders in Uganda. It was hot. But, then again, it was always hot.

Kevin could recall the day with perfect mental clarity as though it had just happened yesterday. He could picture it in his mind with more clarity than his own wedding day to Marjorie or the assault he’d endured by the General or even more so than the day he’d watched someone get brutally shot in the face. The only day he could remember with more perfect clarity than that day was the day his daughter, Charlotte May Price, was born. The moment his daughter was born into the world would always remain his most vivid, cherished memory of all. It was the day his heart had exploded with such a gigantic amount of unconditional love that Kevin Price couldn’t even understand how it managed to fit inside his body.

But onto his second most vivid memory about the other love of his life.

It was a Tuesday—a rather hot Tuesday—and he was laying atop the bed across from Connor, playing a rousing game of Scrabble. Kevin was losing quite horribly to Connor, much as he always did. It annoyed Kevin, how good Connor was at Scrabble. It annoyed him quite a bit, in fact.

Kevin had always been the best Scrabble player in his entire family. He regularly beat his parents and his siblings and even all his cousins. And here in Uganda, he consistently beat all of the Elders, too—well, everyone except for Connor McKinley. For some reason, Connor always beat Kevin at Scrabble. Seriously, every single time. And it annoyed the crap out of Kevin.

On this day in particular, they had been at it for a little over two hours. It was their sixth game in a row now and Connor had that smug look on his face again—the look someone might have as they’re about to get a triple-word score with a X on the end, which was exactly what Connor was about to do.

That was when Kevin suddenly flipped the board over in an angry rage.

Connor, being the calmer one of the pair, just watched on as all of the words he’d so carefully put together got toppled over by one swift movement of Kevin’s hands. Kevin instantly felt guilty once the adrenaline wore off. He felt ashamed, embarrassed, and he thought for sure Connor would be furious with him.

“Sorry,” Kevin muttered under his breath. “We can start over if you want.”

“That’s the third time you flipped the board this week.” Connor’s voice sounded almost amused as he looked up from the dismantled Scrabble board and up into Kevin’s eyes. “Care to tell me what’s been bothering you?”

“You’re the only one I can’t beat at Scrabble and it’s driving me nuts, okay?” Kevin admitted, with
the latter statement being only partially true.

There was something else that had been nagging at him—*gnawing* at him. And that something else was named Connor McKinley. More specifically, that something else was all of the really confusing feelings he’d been having lately for Connor McKinley—and the impure thoughts revolving around kissing him and holding him and doing other unholy things to him that Kevin had always been told two boys shouldn’t do together.

“It’s not my fault you don’t know how to play Scrabble,” Connor retorted.

Kevin scoffed. *“Excuse me? I don’t know how to play Scrabble? Are you kidding me? I’m the king of Scrabble. In fact, my entire family calls me the Scrabble King.”*

“Okay, Scrabble King,” Connor smirked. “Your problem is that you always try way too hard to make the best, most complicated words you can think of. What you *don’t* realize is that the words themselves don’t matter one bit. You just need to try and get the most amount of points you possibly can with the least amount of letters. That’s all that matters in this game and *that’s* how you win at Scrabble.” Connor grinned happily and grabbed the board, smoothing it out in front of them and moving to flip the pieces upside down so they could play. “Now, let’s try again, shall—”

Then suddenly, without any warning, Kevin’s lips were pressed up against Connor’s and he didn’t know why. He didn’t know why at all. All he knew was that it was *happening*—that it was *finally* happening and he *liked* that it was happening. He liked it a *lot*. He liked it so much that all he could think about was doing it again and again and again.

Sure, the kiss was clunky. It was incredibly clunky and wet and inexperienced with neither of them quite sure what to do with their tongues or how to do it without bumping noses. And yet still, somehow, it was the most magical feeling either of them had ever experienced in their lives up until that point. Kevin didn’t know why his hormone-addled brain had decided *that was* the perfect moment to finally have their first kiss, in the middle of a stupid bickering match over Scrabble of all things, but he went with it anyway.

And they went with it. And they went with it *all* the way until suddenly it was one and a half years later and they were back at home in Utah with their parents—with their strict, close-minded Mormon parents. Despite all of the inevitable hardship they knew laid ahead, in front of them, waiting to torment them and block their paths at every turn, at least they knew that they could count on each other. They were together and united and so much in love—but, most importantly, they were happy.

They had a healthy, loving relationship, Kevin and Connor, for most of their time together. Connor was a good listener and gentle and always gave Kevin a shoulder to lean on when he needed one. Kevin would surprise Connor quite often with little things here and there—boxes of his favorite chocolates with strawberry cream in the middle, flowers from the market, and, once they were back in America, even eccentric little trinkets from Five Below and the dollar store. They went out on romantic dates to restaurants and to the movies, where Kevin would always let Connor eat most of the popcorn; and to the lake, in the summertime, and they always held hands despite the disapproving looks they’d sometimes get from the elderly or the close-minded or the Mormons.

But they were happy. They were happy and in love and everything was perfect—for a time.

They both knew things would change once they got back home though. It had to change. They both came from conservative Mormon families who refused to believe they were gay (“It’s just a phase!”) and wouldn’t acknowledge that their love was real (“You can’t honestly tell me you love that *boy* the same way you’d love a *girl*, can you?”) and they were always trying to break them apart (“I’m not giving you money just so you can go spend it on that *boy*.”).
Kevin’s parents were arguably worse than Connor’s mother.

Much worse, in fact.

Connor’s mother had been lucky enough to at least get some clues along the way as her son grew up—clues that told her that maybe, one day, her son might end up swinging the other way. Between the tap dancing classes and the singing lessons and the Barbie dolls and the glitter—Mrs. McKinley had gotten a bit more of a warning. So it really wasn’t much of a shocker when Connor brought Kevin home one day and told her he had a boyfriend. She wasn’t happy about it, but at least she had seen it coming.

Kevin’s parents had no warning at all.

No, they were nothing short of shocked and appalled at Kevin’s admission that not only was he gay, but that Connor McKinley, the boy’s District Leader of their mission, of all things, was also gay. Not only was he gay but he was dating their son and they were claiming to be in love. How disgusting, they thought, how horrible and disgusting and shocking it all was to them, that their perfect little Kevin could be in love with a boy.

Time and time again, since being back home, Kevin and Connor disappointed their parents. They had to. Kevin knew, once he’d come out to them, that he’d be forced to disappoint them just by being himself. It was all just part of being Mormon and gay and having a boyfriend. And having a loving, supportive boyfriend was supposed to make up for all that—for his Mormon parents hounding him that his soul would eventually end up burning in the eternal wraths of Hell. Connor’s presence was supposed to make up for all that. And, for the most part, it did.

At least they hadn’t kicked him out of the house the moment he’d come out. He’d heard of that kind of thing happening to other gay Mormon boys, upon their return home from their missions. He supposed he was lucky enough in that sense. Although, if Kevin was going to be completely honest with himself, sometimes he’d wished they had just kicked him out of their lives. Maybe it would have been much easier to deal with than having to look into their sad, disappointed eyes every goddamn day, hating himself for what he’d done to them.

At first, Kevin tried to be okay with it—he really did—with the judgment and the sadness and the disappointment and the guilt.

What he hadn’t realized, at the time, was how much it would end up affecting him. And it really did affect him. His parents had always been hard on him his entire life, criticizing him for everything, constantly pressuring him to succeed and to do his very best; but, even so, he just wasn’t used to being looked upon with such disdain and disgust. Kevin Price’s brain couldn’t quite handle—that. Because it hurt. It hurt so much. It hurt more than he’d ever expected it to hurt.

His parents’ disappointment affected him so much that they had somehow convinced him to abandon the college plans he’d so carefully made with Connor. They practically forced him into going to BYU instead of NYU, where Connor had gotten accepted into the theatre arts program. The pair had already made plans to move to New York City and go to NYU. Real plans. Plans where they were going to live their lives as boyfriend and boyfriend and make it on their own without their Mormon parents around to dissuade them. They had it all planned out. It was going to be perfect.

And then Kevin ruined it.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” Connor cried into his partner’s chest the night Kevin had broken the news to him. “Why are you doing this to me? We had a plan, Kevin. We had the perfect plan. I can’t believe you’re doing this to me. I just—I can’t believe you’d do this—”
Kevin felt that all-too-familiar pain well up in his chest as he watched Connor break down. He had been growing used to feeling that pain lately—after all, he kept on doing things that made Connor cry. And he hated making Connor cry. He hated it more than anything in the entire world. He hated it even more than he hated Mormonism or the General or avocados or people who put too much sugar in their coffee. He hated it. He never wanted Connor to cry. And, yet, here he was, watching Connor cry, knowing he was the cause.

These days, he was always the cause. And that was what hurt most of all.

“Shhh,” Kevin murmured, trying to soothe Connor’s violent tremors, pulling the other boy close to him. “It’ll be okay, Con. Nothing’s going to change. We won’t let it, I promise. Don’t worry.”

“How? How is this ever going to work, Kevin?” The redhead uncharacteristically yelled.

Connor was yelling and Kevin always knew he was in for it whenever Connor yelled because Connor never yelled. The redhead ripped away from his position against Kevin’s chest.

“How do you think this is ever going to work, Kevin? Do you think I have an unlimited amount of money and can just fly home to Utah whenever I feel like it? You didn’t think this through at all. You didn’t think about how this was going to affect us. All you wanted to do was please your parents. You always try to please them. And this time they got to you, Kevin. You let them get to you and you didn’t even care about how this would affect me. You didn’t even care.”

“That’s not true and you know it’s not true,” Kevin whispered sadly, tears falling out of his eyes at Connor’s harsh words. “They threatened me and said they’d only pay for my college if I went to BYU. What was I supposed to do?”

“Take out student loans, like I did!” Connor cried, falling back down against Kevin’s chest once more. “We had a plan, Kevin. We had a plan and you just ruined it—you just ruined it all without even thinking about what this would do to us.”

“It’ll be okay. We’ll get through it. Hey, look at me. Look at me.” Kevin lifted Connor’s chin with his finger and gave his boyfriend his warmest smile. “I’m not going anywhere, Connor. I love you. I love you with all my heart and I’ll always love you. Everything’s going to work out, I promise.” He gently knocked their foreheads together, rubbing his nose against Connor’s in an Eskimo kiss. “Do you trust me?” He felt Connor nod after a moment, despite the sniffles and the pain and the tears. “We’re gonna be fine, Connor. I promise.”

Connor was so upset, Kevin had to rock him to sleep that night, whispering sweet words into his ear to calm him down enough to be able to sleep. They’d be okay, Kevin kept telling himself. They were Kevin and Connor, two boys against the world who were madly in love. They had to be okay. If anyone was going to be okay, it would be them. Kevin would make sure of it. He would never let Connor down.

Little did Kevin know, this decision would change his life, irreparably, forever.

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Connor could remember the day Kevin broke his heart with perfect mental clarity. With more clarity than the first time he’d stepped off a plane and onto New York City soil or the night he’d lost his virginity to a man and it was so much more painful than he’d ever expected it to be or the day he’d finally gotten his first real off-Broadway acting gig in New York.

The day Kevin broke his heart was, without a doubt, the worst day of Connor’s life.
The couple tried to stay together for a long time after going off to different colleges. Connor even took two jobs and spent all of his savings just so he could make trips home to Utah and visit Kevin. Kevin was horribly afraid of Connor staying with him in his dorm room, since it was a Mormon university, so they always had to sneak around and get hotel rooms. They never had full-on sex (though they did do some things together)—Kevin was still too prude for that. But there was still a lot of kissing and holding and quiet murmurs of affection and the feeling of closeness that they both missed so very much when they were apart.

But each time Connor went to visit Kevin at BYU, his boyfriend seemed to be growing more and more distant.

Connor couldn’t understand it. He couldn’t understand it at all. If anything, the distance was making him miss Kevin even more—his touches, his breathing, his kisses, his sweet words. It practically killed him to be so far apart from his partner. Each time he saw Kevin, he’d be so excited and happy—thrilled, even.

And at first, Kevin was ecstatic to see him too. At first.

But then, it seemed, that with each passing visit, Kevin’s happiness and excitement diminished less and less until, finally, Connor wasn’t even sure if Kevin still loved him anymore. He’d stopped saying it as much. He’d stopped holding him as much. He’d stopped bringing Connor to the movies and stopped buying him little presents just because as much. Connor knew something was really wrong, though, when Kevin stopped talking as much. There had been a time when they could stay up all night talking until the sun came up; but then suddenly it became hard to even get him to talk about the weather or his classes or anything, really.

Connor spent countless nights crying, obsessing over every little thing Kevin said or did (or rather, didn’t say and didn’t do). He started having trouble even getting Kevin to answer his phone calls or his text messages.

He didn’t understand what was happening to Kevin at that school—what was happening to them. They used to be so in love. Connor knew for a fact that Kevin had loved him. Then, suddenly, everything started to change. Everything started to change and the worst part, for Connor, was not understanding why. He’d repeatedly ask Kevin what was wrong, what was happening, if there was anything he could do to fix it—to fix them—but he would never get a real answer out of him.

Then, one day, after ignoring Connor’s calls for a few days straight, Kevin finally called him up and ended it, once and for all.

And Connor was so angry. He was impossibly angry and confused and hurt and scared and alone and he didn’t understand why any of this was happening. They were in love…they were so in love. They’d always said that they were going to make it, their parents be damned.

Eventually, the shock and anger Connor felt gradually simmered down to a more constant, dull pain. And a while after that, he even started to heal a little.

He stayed in New York City after college where he went to therapy and struggled to get acting work. Everyone—his friends, therapist, siblings—tried to convince him that everything happens for a reason and that it was probably all for the best anyway. Finally, Connor started to agree with them. After all, the way Kevin had become so distant and cold was causing him an insurmountable amount of pain. It was like he’d been holding onto something that was drifting further and further away from him and he just couldn’t hold on anymore.

But there were still times, usually late at night as he laid there, wide awake and alone, when he’d
Connor McKinley had been left with a giant, gaping hole inside of him that was etched with the name Kevin Price all over it. It was an ever-burning black scorch mark that never seemed to heal—a deep, open wound in his heart that was constantly yearning to understand why did he and how could he and what happened. Unfortunately, for Connor, Kevin never did provide him with any of those answers.

The estranged ex-boyfriends were forced to see one another every so often at big life events for the other Elders, like college graduations, milestone birthdays, weddings and funerals, but it was never quite the same again.

Arnold and Naba were the first to marry, followed by James Church and Chris Thomas, to one another, then Neeley, to a Mormon woman, and then finally Davis, to a very not-Mormon woman. Michaels seemed to be an eternal bachelor.

Each time Connor and Kevin would see each other at one of these events, it’d be incredibly awkward at first, for both of them. But then Connor would usually have a few drinks in him and get a little bit tipsy. Okay, sometimes more than a little tipsy. He would then somehow convince the semi-Mormon-again Kevin Price, who was freshly divorced and had a kid, to have a few drinks with him and relax.

And then, without fail, they’d always end up in a fight; a bad one, usually. Connor would push and Kevin would have a meltdown about how he absolutely wasn’t gay and he was never attracted to men—and especially not Connor—and how dare Connor keep trying to make him gay and then they’d fight—they’d have long, horrible drunken fights—until one of them eventually passed out or stormed out or went back to their own hotel room to sulk.

It was always the same exact fight too. Kevin would insist that he wasn’t attracted to men and that he definitely didn’t have feelings like that for Connor anymore. Connor was always so confused at this because he knew Kevin—the real Kevin—and would continue to argue the opposite.

Kevin was trying so hard to be a good Mormon again—well, at the very least, a semi-good-Mormon—and Connor was trying ardently to be anything but—and so they’d fight. They’d drink and fight and fight some more and repeat and repeat.

And then the next morning was always incredibly awkward and filled with a lot of silence and stolen glances and longing and heartbreak and tears.

But they’d always just do the same thing anyway, each time, neither of them ever really listening to what the other was trying to say.

As Naba unwrapped her arms from around Kevin and knelt down to pull Charlie into a hug, Kevin watched as Connor McKinley got up from the sofa and walked over to them with a warm smile. Kevin’s heart began to race, beating faster and faster as the redhead approached him until, finally, Connor bridged the distance between them and brought Kevin into a big hug that was filled with
more emotion than either of them expected.

As they pulled back, Kevin could see there wasn’t any anger in Connor’s eyes. Not anymore. Not like there had been the last time they saw each other.

“Hey,” Connor greeted him softly, his eyes lingering on Kevin’s for just a little too long.

“Hey,” Kevin stammered. He felt awfully nervous, despite a simultaneous feeling of relief washing over him. He went to speak, to say something nice, even if it was just some dumb inane pleasantries, but he just wasn’t sure what to say.

“It’s been a long time. Two years, I think,” Kevin finally mustered out. Apparently that was all his brain could come up with.

Connor just nodded sadly. “Two years sounds about right.”

Kevin gestured to Connor. “But, wow, um, you look really good. I mean, you’re not fat or bald or anything like that. Well, not yet, anyway. I mean, you’re only twenty-eight years old, so of course you wouldn’t be balding yet, you’re too young for that. But you could be fat and you’re not, so that’s good, right?” He stuttered, rambling on and on like an idiot. “Congrats on not becoming obese.”


“Sorry,” Kevin sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. “I’m not very good at this.” He then realized he hadn’t introduced him to Charlie. “Oh! Connor, this is Charlie. My daughter. I don’t think you’ve ever met her.”

Connor gazed down at the little girl standing next to Kevin, clutching onto a small pink Barbie suitcase. At the sight of Charlie, who he’d seen tons of pictures of but had never met until now, his face lit up like fireworks.

“Charlie!” He beamed as bright as could be as he kneeled down to properly greet the little girl on her own level. “Hi, sweetie, I’m Connor, your dad’s friend. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

The little girl stared curiously at Connor for a moment, clearly not quite sure how she felt about him just yet.

“I, um, I really like your suitcase! Pink is one of my favorite colors too,” Connor tried again, pointing to the suitcase. He watched as her lips curled up into a smile. “I bet you’re really excited about going to Disney World, aren’t you?” He asked. “It’s gonna be so much fun, I can’t wait.”

Charlie nodded enthusiastically at that, the girl’s tiny smile still going strong.

Deciding she probably trusted him a little more now, he reached out his arms for a hug, to which Charlie responded to by giddily slapping a high-five onto one of his hands.

Connor glanced up at Kevin quizzically.

“Sorry, she’s been really into high-fives lately,” Kevin said. “Come on, Charlie, give Uncle Connor a hug. Go on.” He reached down and gave her a gentle push into Connor’s arms.

“I still can’t believe I haven’t met you until now,” Connor sighed as he squeezed the little girl tightly in his arms.
Pulling back, he grinned, taking in the sight of this tiny little person who looked so much like Kevin.

“So how old are you now? Four?”

“I just turned five!” She cried out with a big smile.

“Five?! Wow, you’re such a big girl.” Connor beamed as he ruffled her hair, but Kevin didn’t miss the wistful sadness that glazed over his eyes. “Well, we have a lot of catching up to do then, don’t we? Considering I’ve missed out on five whole years of your life!” He lowered his voice to a loud whisper. “I even made a list of all the embarrassing stories I can’t wait to tell you about your daddy, but don’t tell him I said that.”

Charlie’s eyes went big as she looked up at Kevin with a grin, almost as if asking approval to enjoy this new information.

Kevin gave her a small nod and half-smile, letting her know it was fine. Turning to Connor, he sighed. “Very funny.”

“Oh, don’t give me that look,” Connor chided as he stood up from his position in front of Charlie and brushed off his pants. “There’s nothing R-rated on my list, don’t worry.” He looked down at Kevin’s daughter again and whispered. “Those will be for when you’re older.”

The little girl giggled. Kevin shook his head. And Connor had that damn smug smile on his face he seemed to always have whenever he saw Kevin these days.

At least, this time, it wasn’t all that awkward. Not yet, anyway.
While Arnold and Naba waited on the never-ending line at the front desk, to retrieve everyone’s room keys, Kevin and Connor sat beside one another on the lobby sofa, trying to busy themselves while they waited for the other Elders to arrive.

Everyone else was late. And Kevin was annoyed because them being late was forcing him to sit there with Connor, alone, in the most awkward silence of his life. He watched on as Harrison and Charlie enthusiastically inspected the many potted plants, books and other treasures they’d found in the grand hotel lobby.

He could practically feel Connor’s eyes on him too. He wasn’t sure what the heck he was staring at. What was he staring at?

Kevin could feel his armpits begin to perspire. His throat felt awfully tight and his brain continued to reel with a million unwanted thoughts. And he couldn’t seem to speak without overanalyzing every word he said, conscious of the way his mouth and tongue were dry and he could feel the way they moved inside his mouth as he spoke.

He hadn’t felt this tongue-tied or nerve-wracked or sweaty or scared in a very long time—well, in two years, anyway. Two years. He hadn’t seen Connor in almost two years.

Thankfully, Connor’s attention soon turned back to the kids playing on the floor. Kevin could feel the weight lift off of him as the other man’s eyes moved away.

“I still can’t believe they’re five already, can you?” Connor broke the silence first, his tone soft and nostalgic. “Sometimes I wonder where all the time goes.”

“Yeah, it’s crazy.” Kevin mustered out, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Time just flies when
you’re having fun.”

Well, that was a dumb thing to say, wasn’t it? And it didn’t even make any sense. His life wasn’t fun. He loved his daughter with all of his heart, sure, but fun? His life revolved around working and working and working endlessly and taking care of Charlie whenever he wasn’t working—and that was it. It was fulfilling, only because of Charlie, but fun wasn’t exactly the word he’d use to describe the past five years of his life.

One by one, the former-Elders did finally arrive, rescuing Kevin and Connor from their rather strained conversation.

Kevin’s face lit up as each of the former-Elders arrived. He embraced each and every one of them with fervor and excitement, telling them how much he’d missed them and meaning every word of it. He’d missed them terribly over the past few years. Kevin, Arnold and Naba were the only ones to remain in Salt Lake City, after all. Despite the fact that seeing Connor again was sure to be a weird and unwelcome distraction, this trip with all of his friends was desperately needed.

“Oh my gosh, Chris!” Connor cried out as he raced towards his former mission companion and hugged him with a surprising amount of desperation.

“Good to see you, Con.” Chris replied warmly, squeezing Connor back.

“James!” Connor cried as he embraced the former-Elder Church. “I’ve missed you guys so much. Oh my gosh.”

Kevin was completely puzzled by Connor’s reaction. He knew the three of them got together quite frequently, with Chris and James living in New York as well, so he wasn’t quite sure why Connor was acting as though he hadn’t seen him in a long time. He supposed he’d find out later, in due time.

“Attention, Elders, we come bearing keys!” Arnold announced as he and Naba raced over to the group. “Oh, wow, the whole gang’s here now.” He squealed, happily, practically doing a little dance at the sight. “Let’s get this party started!”

Kevin couldn’t help but grin inwardly at Arnold’s excitement. Everything about Arnold Cunningham was pure and loving and good. It comforted him to know that no matter how confusing things got sometimes, at least there was always Arnold—sweet, bumbling, awkward, excited Arnold. And Naba, too, of course—who was just as warm and sweet as her husband, but, every once in a while, scared the bejeesus out of Kevin. They were his best friends in the whole world, Arnold and Naba—what would he have done had they not come into his life? He didn’t much care to think about it.

“Okay, Kevin, here’s yours.” Arnold sang, handing Kevin his room key. “Here you go, Davis. Chris and James, here ya go. Con, here you are.”

“Uncle Connor!” Charlie chirped, trying to get his attention. “Uncle Connor!”

The little girl was impatiently tugging at the hem of the redhead’s shirt. People sometimes got annoyed by Charlie’s insistence, but Connor didn’t seem to mind at all. In fact, he seemed to be nothing but all smiles whenever he looked at Charlie. It would’ve melted Kevin’s heart a little, had they not carried so much baggage between the two of them.

“What room are you in?” She asked, jumping up and down.

Kevin’s ears perked up at that. He gazed over at Connor, hoping to God his room would be as far away as possible from room 492—the room he and Charlie were apparently in.
“Hi, sweetie. It looks like I’m in,” Connor glanced down at his room key with a smile, “492. How about you guys?”

Kevin’s blood ran cold as he glanced down at his own room key: 492.

492? How is that possible?

“Daddy!” Charlie called out, running over to Kevin. “What room are we in? I hope we’re close to Uncle Connor and Uncle Arnold and Aunt Naba and Harry and everybody!”

“There must be some mistake.” Kevin sputtered. “You can’t be in 492.”

He flipped his room key over and over in his hands as though doing so might magically change the number on its front to anything but 492.

“This can’t be right.” He said, scowling, and stalked over to Connor. “Let me see your room key.”

He grabbed it roughly out of Connor’s hands before the other man even had a chance to answer.

Kevin glanced down at his own room key. 492.

Then at Connor’s. 492.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

“Dammit.” Kevin cursed before looking up into Connor’s eyes.

His ex-boyfriend’s sky blue eyes seemed to be filled with the same amount of nervous trepidation Kevin was feeling. He huffed as he handed the key card back to Connor.

“Looks like they messed up our rooms.” Kevin sighed. “They have both of us in 492. Let’s talk to Arnold and get it sorted out.”

Connor opened his mouth as if to say something, but promptly shut it.

Kevin felt his forehead begin to perspire again as he raced over to where Arnold stood, talking to Neeley and Chris. He tapped his best friend’s shoulder, cutting off whatever Neeley was saying to him. Kevin didn’t much care, at the moment. He needed to get this thing squared away—now.

“I think they messed up our rooms or something. They have me and Connor in 492 together. We need to fix it. Now.” Kevin demanded. “Like, right now.”

“No, no, they didn’t mess anything up!” Arnold shook his head, a stupidly large grin on his face. “We’re in 492 too.”

“I don’t”, Kevin stammered, “I don’t understand.”

“We’re in a suite, Kev!” Arnold explained, play-punching his best friend in the arm.

Connor and Kevin exchanged a nervous glance before looking back at Arnold in horror.

“A—a suite?” Connor swallowed audibly. “You got us a suite?”

“Together?” Kevin finished for him.
“Heck, yes, I got us a suite together!” Arnold exclaimed. “You guys, me, Naba, and the kids are all in 492 because it’s the biggest. James, Chris, and Michaels are in 493 and Davis and Neeley are in 494. I thought it’d be a blast to have suites right next to each other—that way it’ll be just like the Uganda days!” He thought for a moment. “Well, almost.”

Kevin paled.

The buzzing chatter of the Elders had quieted down to a dull murmur and Kevin could feel their gazes on him now, waiting for a reaction of some kind, he supposed.

He honestly wanted nothing more than to choke Arnold out for being so unbelievably inconsiderate of his feelings. His best friend knew damn well he wouldn’t be okay with sharing a suite with Connor—his ex-boyfriend who apparently couldn’t bear to be in the same room with him for more than a couple of hours without provoking a fight.

Arnold knew that. And yet, he did this to him. Why? Why would he do this?

Kevin was determined to get to the bottom of this unexpected fiasco, but he couldn’t do it here, in the middle of a Disney lobby, with all of his friends staring at him. He wouldn’t make a scene. Not this time. Not like he did at Michaels’ twenty-fifth birthday party or Davis’s wedding.

Flustered and upset and not knowing at all what to make of this latest predicament he’d found himself in, Kevin just skulked into the elevator, pulling Charlie close behind him. The jubilant group of former Elders were all back to chattering happily with one another, re-connecting over old inside jokes and excitement over the shenanigans to come. Everyone was so happy. Well, everyone but Kevin and Connor, who were simply flushed pink, staring down at their shoes in a strange silence, trying desperately not to make eye contact.

“Home sweet home!” Arnold clapped as they entered the rather spacious suite, equipped with a living area, two bedrooms, and a kitchenette. Peering into one of the bedrooms, Arnold called out to the group. “Naba and I claim this room!”

Kevin swallowed the gigantic lump of anxiety that had formed in his throat during their brief elevator ride. He stole a quick glance back at Connor, who was looking around the suite, compulsively running his fingers through his hair. Connor always did that whenever he was really nervous, Kevin knew. He still knew a lot of things about Connor that he probably should’ve forgotten by now.

Connor didn’t appear to be any happier than Kevin about this latest news of suite sharing. At least they were on the same page for once.

As Arnold came bounding out of the bedroom he had just claimed, he pointed to the other room.

“You, Connor, and Charlie can share that room over there.” Arnold offered. “It’s huge. There’s two king beds, three closets and a bathroom. There’s tons of room!”

“Arnold, can I talk to you for a minute?” Kevin asked, icily.

“Sure, buddy!”

“Alone.”
He grabbed Arnold by the arm and dragged him into the bedroom he’d been relegated to sharing with Connor. There was no way that was going to be allowed to happen. Not now, not ever. Well, maybe in a weird, parallel universe where Kevin had never gone to BYU and Connor had learned to let things go—maybe, just maybe, in that universe, they could have shared a room civilly without any drama. But, sure as heck not in this one.

“Are you some kind of sadist?” Kevin shouted at his friend, slamming the door shut behind them.

“Shhh!” Arnold shushed him, visibly appalled at Kevin’s behavior. “These walls are paper thin and you just yelled really loud.”

“What in God’s name were you thinking putting me and Connor in the same room together?” He demanded, not giving one ounce of a crap about the walls being too thin.

“Alright, let’s just calm do—“

“No. No, I will not calm down.” Kevin said, annoyed. “What, the same suite wasn’t bad enough, you had to put us in the same room too? What’s next, making us share a bed together?”

“No,” Arnold rolled his eyes, “that would be ridiculous, Kev.”

“Well, I’m glad to know you draw the line somewhere.”

“Kevin, can you just stop and listen to me for a second?” Arnold pleaded.

“No.” He spat. “Are you actually trying to go out of your way to make this the worst trip of my entire life?” Kevin asked, his throat growing tighter by the second. “Because if that’s what you’re going for, then you’re doing a fantastic job so far.”

“No!” Arnold shook his head. “No, no, of course not. We just—“

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you be in charge of booking the rooms.” Kevin growled. “God, I can’t believe this.”

He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to calm himself down. His entire body felt tense and everything hurt and it was all getting tight—too tight, it was all much too tight—and his throat felt funny and he found himself unable to take normal breaths. Too tight—not enough air was getting through.

“I can’t believe you’d do this to me.” Kevin choked out. “You had to know I wouldn’t be okay with this, Arnold. You had to know that.”

“Shhh.” Arnold shushed him in a gentle whisper. “Seriously, Kev, do you want everyone and their mother to hear you? How about Charlie? Do you really want her to hear you screaming your head off like a psychopath?”

Kevin just sighed. Of course he didn’t want his daughter to hear him screaming. He tried again to take a deep breath.

“Look,” Arnold whispered, gently. “In my defense, this wasn’t even my idea.”

“What?”

“It was Naba’s idea, okay?” Arnold confessed. “I just didn’t…exactly…disagree with it.”

“Naba’s idea?” Kevin asked, puzzled. “Why? Why on Earth would she want to torture me like
“No one wants to torture you, Kevin.” Arnold said, softly. “We love you, remember?”

“Well, excuse me if I’m not exactly feeling the love right now.”

“We love you.” Arnold affirmed. “Naba just thought it might be a good way to get you two talking again, maybe force you to work out some of the issues you’ve been having, that’s all. And with Charlie around, maybe you’d actually talk for once instead of just trying to kill each other like you always do.” He sighed. “I swear, it sounded like a good idea at the time…”

“Well, it’s not.” Said Kevin, flatly.

“Fine, I’ll admit it probably wasn’t the smartest or well-thought-out plan, but we were just trying to help—“

“No. This is, by far, the worst—no, the stupidest—idea you have ever come up with.” Kevin blazed, his throat feeling tighter now. “I can’t…Arnold, I can’t breathe…”

He gasped for a panicked breath, clutching onto the dresser behind him for support. His throat felt awfully tense, tight and narrowing in on itself. He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to take in a deep breath.

“I can’t breathe, Arnold…” Kevin gasped, clutching tighter onto the dresser. “I can’t…”

“Okay, okay, shhh.” Arnold soothed, reaching out to take Kevin away from the dresser. “Calm down, buddy. Come with me.”

Arnold brought his distraught friend down to sit next to him on one of the beds. Despite the anger reeling inside his body, Kevin allowed himself to take comfort in Arnold’s touch. It calmed him down slightly and his throat began to feel a little less tight.

“Look, Kev, we just love you, that’s all.” Arnold explained, quietly. “We love you so much and we’ve just been really worried about you lately. We want you to be happy.”

Kevin just rolled his eyes. He knew Arnold and Naba meant well—they always meant well—but they honestly had no reason to worry about him. He was fine. He had Charlie, his favorite person in the whole world, and a decent job. Granted, it was a boring job in a boring office with mostly boring Mormons (it was Salt Lake City, after all). But at least he was able to feed his daughter and keep a roof over their heads. Charlie was happy and she went to a nice Mormon school and lived in a nice house. It was small, sure, but she had a decent sized bedroom and she even had her own playroom too. They were doing well, more than well. So what if he had no social life other than Arnold and Naba? So what if he didn’t feel like going out on dates? He was fine. He was just fine.

“I’m serious.” Arnold pressed. “You haven’t gone out on a single date since Marjorie left. That was over four years ago, dude.”

“Don’t do this.” Kevin trembled. “Please don’t. Not here.”

“Look, I know you’re just going to tell me how ‘wrong I am’ and ‘how dare I’, like you always do, but let’s face facts, Kevin—the only person you’ve ever really loved was Connor.”

Kevin’s eyes widened as he went to protest, ardently protest, but Arnold lifted a hand to stop him.

“No.” Arnold shook his head. “No more lies, Kevin. No more lying to me or to yourself. Look, I’m
not going to pretend to know what happened between you two because I don’t. I really don’t. I only know what you’ve told me and that whole story made zero sense.”

“I’m not doing this.” Kevin said, slamming his eyes shut. “Not here. Please don’t make me do this here.”

“Buddy,” Arnold shook his head, sadly, “I love you. And I know you have some major issues about being gay and all—“

“I am not.” Kevin cut him off.

“—but you can’t honestly sit there and tell me that what I said isn’t true.” Arnold continued, ignoring Kevin’s protest. “You loved him, Kevin. And to be honest, I think you still love him.”

Kevin wanted to disagree with him. He really did.

No, he didn’t just want to disagree with him—he wanted to fight him, punch him, scream at him. Scream that he had no right to say those things to him and that he was a good Mormon and that he liked women like good Mormon men were supposed to and that the whole thing with Connor was just some stupid, unfortunate teenage rebellion that should have never been allowed to happen. That was what he wanted to say to Arnold.

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t say those things. Not to Arnold. He couldn’t say them to Arnold because he knew, deep down, that Arnold was right. Arnold was always right. And Kevin hated that Arnold was always right.

“You know,” Arnold continued, softly now, “I don’t really care if you think that liking men is ‘sinful’ or whatever crap you’ve been told to believe,” Arnold said, with an obvious disdain for the Mormon Church’s views on the subject. “I know you loved him, Kev. We all know you loved him.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Kevin sighed, finally conceding to the truth of Arnold’s accusation. “It has nothing at all to do with anything.”

“It has everything to do with everything.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Kevin said. “Not anymore.”

“Oh, yeah?” Arnold said. “Then why do you think you two end up fighting every time you see each other, huh? Well, it sure as heck isn’t because there’s nothing there. People that don’t care about each other don’t fight.”

“I never said I didn’t care about him.” Kevin corrected him, quietly.

“There’s something there, Kevin.” Arnold pressed. “There’s always been something there and you know it. You’ve always known it.”

“No!” Kevin shouted, shoving his face into his hands now. This was too much. “Shut up, shut up, will you just shut up!”

“Alright! Jesus, calm—“

“I don’t have those kinds of feelings for him or any other man.” Kevin cried out, his eyes burning a bit from holding back tears. “Not anymore. You know that, Arnold. I’ve told you that a million times.”
“Fine.” Arnold conceded, but Kevin could tell his friend wasn’t buying any of it. “But you can’t tell me you two don’t have some major issues to work out. That much is clear as freakin’ day.”

“So what if we do?” Kevin asked, exhausted now. “It shouldn’t affect you or anyone else. It’s our business.”

“Well, it does affect us.” Arnold said. “You guys can’t even be in the same room together without starting a fight. It makes getting together as a group really difficult, you know. You two practically ruined Davis’s wedding.”

Kevin felt his cheeks turn pink at the reminder.

“I’ve apologized to him about that more times than I can count, Arnold.” He said, still struggling with his breathing. “What else do you want me to do, huh?”

“Nothing, we just—“

“Write it out in Sanskrit? Bake him a cake? Sacrifice my first born child? What is it that I have to do to prove how sorry I am about that? Besides, Connor started it that night and you know he did, so I don’t even want to hear it.” Kevin spat. “You know he did. He wouldn’t let it go just like he never lets it go.”

“Alright, alright. Calm down.” Arnold whispered, wrapping an arm around Kevin’s shoulders. “We just thought this might help to, I don’t know, get you guys talking again or something.”

Kevin groaned at Arnold’s words. He was sitting on the bed now, face buried in his palms, trying to simmer his anger down to a more manageable level. It was practically threatening to burst out of his skin. How could Arnold and Naba do this to him? He was so looking forward to this trip and now it’s turned into some kind of group therapy session. Or worse—a couple’s therapy session—well, ex-couple’s therapy session. Kevin didn’t like the sound of any of it. Where was a hole when you needed one to crawl into and die a slow death?

Deep down, though, he knew Arnold was right. Arnold was always right about these kinds of things.

Not so deep down, he would have loved nothing more than to murder him right there on the spot. Well, not really murder him. Maybe just kick him or punch him or shove a pie in his face. Something like that.

It was then that they heard a soft knocking at the door. Slowly, the door cracked open a bit and Kevin could see Connor’s face hesitantly peek into the room.

“Hey, guys.” Connor said softly. “Sorry to bother you. Can I come in for a sec?”

“Of course, come on in.” Arnold waved him over. “Join the party.”

“Thanks.” Connor chuckled sadly as he approached the two men on the bed.

“Sorry about all this, Con.” Arnold apologized. “It’s honestly all mine and Naba’s fault so don’t be too hard on Kevin, okay? He wasn’t involved with the whole suite…room…situation…thing.” He trailed off, clearly not sure what to say to make any of this better.

Connor tilted his head and gave Arnold a forgiving half-smile. Kevin just turned away from Connor, in favor of staring silently at his shoes, not much wanting to look at either one of them right now.
“Hey, Kevin.” He heard Connor call out softly, in that way he always did. In the way that made him cringe. Kevin felt the man cautiously sit down next to him on the bed, the mattress spring making a creak sound as he did so.

“What do you want?” Kevin involuntarily snapped. It came out sounding harsher than he’d intended. Sighing, he shook his head. “Sorry, I—I didn’t mean to—“

“Don’t worry about the room, alright?” Connor said, softly. “I’m fine with sleeping on the couch out in the living room. It has a pull out bed and everything. I’ll be totally fine out there and then you won’t need to worry about me at all, okay?”

Just as Kevin was about to reply, he heard the pitter patter of Charlie’s little feet come running into the room.

Damn Connor for having left the door opened. Clearly, he didn’t have kids or he would’ve known better.

“Weee!” Charlie shouted as she flung her tiny body atop the other bed. “This is the biggest bed I ever saw in my whole life! Is this where Uncle Connor is gonna sleep? It’ll be just like a sleepover party!”

She grinned expectantly at the rather disheveled group of adults in front of her, clearly not understanding at all what was going on.

“No.” Connor finally spoke up, his tone soft. He had that wistful smile on his face again, the one he seemed to have whenever he looked at Charlie. “The big bed’s all yours, sweetheart. Have at it.”

“Really?” She cried out in glee and promptly began bouncing up and down on the big bed. “Look, daddy! I get the big bed! I get the big bed!”

“I see.” Kevin said. He managed a weak smile, for Charlie’s sake.

As Kevin looked up into Connor’s eyes, he could see the sorrow that had glazed over them as he watched Charlie bounce up and down on the bed. They glistened delicately with unshed tears in the soft light of the room.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay in the living room?” Kevin asked, the guilt beginning to gnaw at him now. “Me and Charlie can sleep out there if you want.”

“No, no, don’t be silly.” Connor shook his head with a small smile. Kevin could tell it was a forced one. “You’re a family. You should have the bedroom.”

“You sure?” Kevin asked. “We can just—“

“I’m sure.” Connor cut him off. “I’ll be more comfortable out there anyway. It’s close to all the alcohol and snacks and I won’t need to worry about waking anyone up if I stay out later than the rest of you. So, really, don’t worry about me.” The redhead assured as he stood up to leave. “Besides, look how happy she is about the big bed. I don’t want to crush her dreams or anything.”

“I love the big bed!” Charlie cried out to Connor with a giant grin as she continued to jump up and down. “Thanks, Uncle Connor!”

Connor’s lips curled into a soft smile. “No problem, sweetie.”

“Thank you.” Kevin whispered.
As Connor headed for the door, he stopped a moment, hesitating before turning back around.

“Look, Kevin, I, um—I came here to enjoy ten days in Disney World with my friends and have a good time, okay?”

Connor’s voice was firm and strong, yet still managed to maintain that same gentle quality he seemed to always have about him.

He continued. “I didn’t come here to fight with you or to dig up old memories or to get you to change your mind about us or anything like that.” Connor said, moving closer to where Kevin sat. “So why don’t we make a pact, okay? No fighting…at least, not while we’re in Disney World.”

He reached out his hand to Kevin in a gesture of peaceful truce, beckoning him to take it.

Hesitantly, Kevin allowed himself to take the other man’s hand into his own. The small touch, the feeling of his skin brushing up against Connor’s, felt so foreign and strange, yet intensely familiar. And he hated the little ripple of electric current he felt bounding through his body the moment Connor’s delicate fingers glided over his own.

“No fighting in Disney World.” Kevin affirmed with a weak smile. He retracted his hand almost immediately from Connor’s, desperately wanting that feeling to go away as soon as humanly possible.

After Arnold and Connor left the room to get settled in, Kevin and Charlie started unpacking their belongings. He showed her where to put all her stuff away in the little cubbies and drawers and explained where the bathroom was located and how to use the hotel bathtub and everything.

“Daddy?” Charlie asked later that night as they were getting ready for bed, Kevin slipping her favorite pink Minnie Mouse nightgown over her head.

“Yeah, hun?”

“Why couldn’t Uncle Connor stay in here with us?” His little one asked sweetly. “He was supposed to get my big bed but you didn’t let him.”

The innocent question made Kevin feel as though a ton of bricks had suddenly plummeted down to the bottom of his belly with a hard thud. He didn’t even know how to begin to answer that question. And he didn’t much care to.

Instead, he just wrapped his hands around the little girl’s waist with a sigh, giving her a gentle squeeze and gazing into her bright green eyes.

“It’s complicated, sweetheart.” Kevin whispered honestly, his throat suddenly dry. “It’s really, really complicated.”

“Why?”

“It just is.” Kevin said. “You’ll understand one day, when you’re older.”

“But don’t you like Uncle Connor? He’s nice and he likes my pink suitcase.” Charlie said quietly, looking down now. She puckered her lips sadly. “I don’t have to like him though if you don’t want
me to.”

“Oh, Charlie…” Kevin sighed, the sorrowful sound of Charlie’s voice, devastating to his ears. “Of course you can like him. You should like him.” Pausing, he lowered his voice slightly. “And I didn’t mean to give you the impression that I didn’t.”

“But aren’t you mad at him?” She asked softly, looking back up to meet Kevin’s eyes.

Kevin hesitated, seriously considering the question for a few moments.

“No, Charlie.” He said with finality. “I’m not mad at him. Not anymore.”

“You act like you’re mad at him.” She observed as she played with the collar of Kevin’s pajama top. “Why?”

“It’s complicated.” Kevin repeated his answer, quieter and more carefully than before.

“Why’s it so complicated?” Charlie asked gingerly, clearly not understanding the meaning of the word complicated.

He sighed sadly. How could he even begin to explain any of this to a barely-five-year-old?

“Could we maybe, um, not talk about this anymore tonight?” Kevin asked softly. “Can you do that for me?”

“Okay.” She nodded, despite the curiosity Kevin could tell was eating away at her.

Charlie was always curious, about everything. It was a wonderful trait to have and he was proud of her for being able think about things for herself, but, every so often, it also made Kevin feel as though it might drive him to an early grave.

“Thanks.” Kevin pulled his little girl into a hug. “What do you say I read you a bedtime story then we get some sleep, okay? Daddy’s really tired and you don’t look so chipper yourself.”

He bent down and rubbed their noses together, delicately, in an Eskimo kiss. Grinning now, the tired dad allowed his mind to drift to thoughts of what laid ahead for his daughter the next day at the park.

“We have a big day tomorrow, you know.” Kevin beamed. “Your very first day at Disney. How crazy excited are you?”

“Really excited!” Charlie cried out happily. “I can’t wait!”

Kevin couldn’t help but feel his heart turn to mush as he watched her face bloom into a giant grin at the mention of Disney World. No matter what happened with Connor or anyone else in his life—he reminded himself that at least he’d get to experience Charlie’s first trip to Disney World. And he was determined to make it a great one.

“Good.” He beamed as his daughter wrapped her little arms around his neck.

“Daddy?” She asked, smiling sheepishly now. “Can I sleep in the big bed with you? Pretty please?”

“Uh-uh.” He poked her belly playfully. “You have your own big bed, remember?”

He reached down and picked up his little girl, lifting her up into the air, making her squeal in pure delight, before gently tossing her back down onto the bed. He started tickling her mercilessly—the tiny, uncontrollable giggles escaping her mouth sounding like sweet music to his ears.
She fell asleep that night in her own big bed, only to wake up around midnight and secretly crawl into Kevin’s, where she slept for the remainder of the night, cradled into her father’s side, dreaming of Mickey Mouse and water slides and all the ice cream and candy a kid could ever want.
“Are those *Mickey* waffles?” Connor giggled as he took a seat at breakfast in the hotel cafeteria, across from Kevin, Charlie, and the Cunninghams. The rest of the group was there too, at the other side of the table.

“Mickey waffles,” Kevin said, happily, “all part of a healthy, balanced breakfast at Disney.”

Kevin beamed as he took a huge bite out of Mickey’s ear with way too much syrup dripping off the sides. They had all just sat down to eat and Kevin was already digging maniacally into the syrupy goodness like a small child.

Connor couldn’t help but smile as he watched a glob of excess syrup drip all the way down Kevin’s chin. He was fairly certain that Kevin Price was the only person in the entire universe whom Connor could still find attractive with syrup dripping all over his chin like a two-year-old. Kevin Price had many imperfections, but most were imperfections that Connor McKinley had always found to be endearing. So even with sugary syrup dripping down his chin, Connor couldn’t help the swell of *something* he felt bubbling up in his chest.

“You are such a dork.” Connor shook his head and reached across the table so he could wipe the bit of syrup off of Kevin’s chin with a napkin.

Connor felt the other man flinch slightly at the unexpected touch, so he pulled back immediately, realizing that the close contact seemed to make the other man uncomfortable.

“Sorry,” Connor apologized quietly, “you just had some runaway syrup right here.” He pointed to the spot on his chin where the syrup had been.

Kevin nodded with a small smile, letting him know it was okay, and continued to munch hungrily on
“My daddy really loves Disney World.” Charlie explained matter-of-factly to Connor, not having any idea that this information was already common knowledge amongst the group of former Elders. “Like, really, really a lot.”

“Oh, trust me,” Connor said, not without a snort, “we know.”

“Whenver he reads me Disney stories, he always does the voices and when he does Goofy, it sounds just like the real thing!” She said. “It’s the best! You’ll have to hear it tonight when we do story time.”

“Story time?” Connor smirked at Kevin. He may have gotten a bit too much pleasure out of making his ex-boyfriend’s cheeks go red.

“Yeah, it’s the best!” Charlie cried. “Wanna come over tonight for story time?”

“Charlie, stop it.” Kevin said, looking slightly flustered now at this latest development. “Uncle Connor doesn’t want to come over for story time.”

“Oh, no,” Connor said, grinning rather wickedly, “Uncle Connor definitely wants to come over for story time.”

“No,” Kevin said, more forcefully, “you don’t.”

Connor tilted his head, pretending to think it over for a moment. “You know, I’m pretty sure I do.”

“Connor, you really don’t have to—“

“It’s a date, Charlie. You, me, and Goofy—story time, tonight.” Connor said, giving the little girl a wink. “And when I say Goofy, I mean your dad, obviously.”

“Yay! Did you hear that, Daddy?” Charlie cried, poking Kevin in the arm. “Uncle Connor’s coming over for story time!”

Kevin just glared at Connor as he shoveled another huge bite of waffle into his mouth.

“Okay, are you ready for embarrassing daddy story number one?” Connor asked, grinning excitedly at Charlie. “It’s about how much your daddy loves Disney.”

“Yeah!”

“Well, when your daddy was younger—and by younger, I mean like twenty—he owned an entire set of Disney-themed underpants.” Connor divulged, quite giddily. He was getting way too much enjoyment out of this. “I still remember them all too. There was a Mickey and Minnie one with hearts all over it and then there was a Pluto one. Oh, and he had all the ducks—Donald Duck, Daisy Duck, the little ducks. But my favorite pair were the Scrooge McDuck ones. You wanna know why?”

“Why?” Charlie squealed, her face all smiles.

“Because across the back, they said ‘good as gold’ in big yellow letters.” Connor said with a nostalgic laugh. “It was fantastic and yet so terrible at the same time.”

“I remember those!” Arnold blurted out, making Charlie completely lose herself to a fit of giggles, her spoonful of eggs ending up mostly in her lap.
“Daddy, you didn’t!” She gasped.

“Oh, daddy did.” Connor said flatly, watching on with delight as the blush on Kevin’s face deepened even further. “Daddy definitely did.”

“I can double confirm that.” Arnold raised his hand.

“Triple!” Naba called out.

“Okay, seriously, how do you all remember that?” Kevin asked, hotly. “It was like eight years ago.”

“He even had to order them from a special catalog and everything.” Connor told Charlie before taking a big gulp of orange juice, his satisfied smirk in full form.

“Come on, you promised me nothing R-Rated.” Kevin reminded him pointedly, slamming his fork down on his plate. “Didn’t you?”

“Sweetie, the Scrooge McDuck underpants story isn’t even close to R-Rated.” Connor said, rolling his eyes. “And if you think it is, then we have two entirely different definitions of R-Rated.”

“I hate you.” Kevin muttered under his breath as he took another bite of breakfast, but Connor caught a glimpse of the secret smile that flashed across his face. It came and went so quickly, it would have been easy to miss it.

Connor didn’t miss it.

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“Daddy, look!”

Kevin held Charlie’s little hand in his as they made their way through Magic Kingdom, the kids stopping at literally every single sight, enamored and in total love with it all. They wanted to do everything and see everything and climb on everything in sight.

Earlier in the day, he had gotten pretty annoyed at Connor for embarrassing him at breakfast, but most of his anger had dissipated once they entered the park. Disney World had that effect on people—it just all felt so magical and wonderful and fun that it was nearly impossible not to smile. And smile he did.

Much to Kevin’s delight, Charlie’s face was practically glowing. He couldn’t help but feel slightly overwhelmed inside as he watched Charlie experience it all for the very first time. It was amazing and special and so, so important to him that he probably would have cried a little, had Connor and the other Elders not been there. He may or may not have teared up once or twice.

“It’s the big castle!” Charlie announced to the group. “Daddy, look!”

“I see it, hun.” He grinned.

“Are we going there next?” She asked, jumping up and down.

“You bet we are.” Kevin said, giving her little hand a gentle squeeze. “I want to get a picture of you and Harry right in front. There may even be characters walking around, so be on the look out.”
He excitedly led his daughter and the rest of the group up the stairs to Cinderella’s Castle, arguably one of the most magical places in Disney World. They spent some time there, taking pictures of the kids. Charlie and Harrison ran around like maniacs, all over the place, as kids often did, wanting to inspect every little thing with their hands.

Kevin couldn’t help but watch on as James and Chris laughed like children together, taking silly kissing selfies of themselves with their phones in front of the castle. He wasn’t sure why, but Kevin felt a small pang of jealousy shoot through his body at the sight. He shouldn’t have been jealous though. No. He wasn’t like that anymore—like Chris or James or Connor. But still, he couldn’t seem to take his eyes off the pair. They just looked so happy. Their closeness and obvious affection for each other was something he hadn’t felt with another person in a very long time. He honestly hadn’t felt like that since being with Connor, years ago, and he missed it—he missed it terribly, more than he’d ever care to admit aloud—the laughing and the holding and the kissing and the—

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When Kevin Price turned nineteen years old, all he cared about was going on his mission. That was the goal he’d worked towards his entire life—the only reason he always tried so dang hard to be the best at everything. He was going to go on his mission (hopefully to Orlando, Florida) and do something incredible. He was going to make God proud, his parents even prouder and his friends and siblings insanely jealous. He was going to be Elder Price, the best, most accomplished Elder the Mormon Church had ever seen. One thing was for sure—in latter days, he would get his paradise planet, Planet Orlando. And everything would be perfect there.

When Kevin Price turned twenty years old, he was in the middle-of-nowhere, Uganda, almost a year after they’d been ex-communicated from the Church. Elder Price spent his days preaching made-up parables by his best friend, the biggest misfit in Mormon history, Arnold Cunningham. But there had been at least one good thing to come out of it, besides their newfound freedom and all. It was there that he met his first crush, first love, first everything—Connor McKinley.

Connor was sweet and caring and very funny, in his own weird, neurotic, very specific Connor-like way, and the best part was that he seemed to like Kevin just as much as Kevin liked him. Soon after, their like quickly turned into love.

Kevin loved talking to Connor. He especially liked when they’d talk in soft whispers, late at night when they were half-asleep, murmuring things and pieces of dreams that didn’t make a lot of sense, and laughing—the laughing was the best part—and the cuddling too, was also the best.

He loved simply gazing at Connor, too, mostly at his face. He’d hold Connor in his arms at night and watch as he fell fast asleep. Sometimes, he’d continue watching Connor even after he’d fallen asleep. He’d run a slow hand down the boy’s cheek, tenderly, admiring his boyfriend’s porcelain skin that was dotted with teeny tiny freckles. Some drool would occasionally leak out of Connor’s mouth, but Kevin didn’t care. Connor was so cute and adorable and he was Kevin’s. He was all Kevin’s, nobody else’s. Connor didn’t want anybody else. He wanted Kevin. Kevin had won. He had won life by getting someone as kind and funny and soulful and beautiful as Connor McKinley.

Kevin loved Connor’s body, too. The way his bottom was round and soft and just a little bit squishy and how his waist curved in just a bit, in all the right places. And his hair—Kevin adored his boyfriend’s (often unkempt) strawberry hair. One of his favorite things to do was to just run his fingers through it, as many times as he possibly could. And the boy’s eyes, his bright blue eyes, as blue as the sea. He loved to gaze into those eyes.

Through the rose-colored glasses of first love, Kevin saw Connor just like that. Always like that, even when Connor was sweaty or sad or angry or wet or pouty or frustrated or completely covered
in mud from gardening—Kevin always saw him just like that.

More than that though, Kevin loved Connor, all of Connor, for who he was on the inside. He loved the way Connor always took care of them, of the Elders, without ever asking for anything in return. He loved the way he’d get nervous sometimes and freak out over the silliest of things (it was pretty funny to watch), but then he’d always laugh at himself later on. He loved the way he’d chastise Kevin for breaking too many of the rules, like drinking way too much coffee or cursing or going up on the roof. He even loved the way Connor would always beat him at Scrabble (though, Connor did admit Kevin’s game was steadily improving). Kevin loved everything about Connor McKinley, even his faults. Sometimes, especially his faults, as those were the things that made Connor McKinley uniquely Connor McKinley.

Kevin had even hoped that, one day, not too far from then, he and Connor would be living someplace else—someplace more accepting of their relationship than Uganda or Salt Lake City, someplace like New York City or Orlando, where they’d have their own tiny little apartment that they’d decorate exactly how they wanted it. They’d take showers together in the morning, sweetly washing each other, and enjoy lazy Sundays in bed, kissing, with coffee and eggs and pancakes and love. Love was the most important thing. And it was going to be the most amazing life, with Connor. Kevin knew it. He just knew it. He was sure of it—more sure than he’d ever been about anything else in his life. It was the only thing he was sure of, in those days, since he’d lost everything else worth living for.

When Kevin Price turned twenty-one years old, he was slowly growing used to having everything he’d ever hoped for, ripped out from under him. It was becoming a theme, with him.

He was still in love with Connor—very much so—but dealing with real life things and real life parents and real life issues were proving to be a heck of a lot harder than he’d ever thought possible.

His idealism had been crushed before, many times. The first was at the missionary training center, when he was assigned to Uganda instead of Orlando. Then again in Uganda, when he watched that man get shot in the face and had a meltdown over his faith. Then again, with the General, of which afterwards, he had yet another meltdown over his faith. And then, finally, things started to get better, for a while, because of Connor. Because he had love. And he finally understood why they’d written so many songs about it. It was magic. There was no other word that could possibly be used to properly describe the feeling of being in love with someone.

But then the rug got ripped out from under him once again when he came home to his parents, who treated him as though he was somehow diseased, bringing up his sexual orientation and their disdain for Connor McKinley every single solitary chance they got. Kevin was miserable there, at home in Utah. His parents made his life absolutely miserable. He knew they didn’t even mean to make him miserable, they just wanted him to be different, to be “normal” again. They wanted their perfect little Kevin Price back. And, every once in a while, Kevin found himself wanting that too.

After being back home for a few months, Kevin Price was sent to BYU, where he didn’t want to go but his parents threatened him until eventually he decided to just stop fighting them. He was growing weary of fighting them. Connor had been upset, very upset and rightfully so, as he and Kevin had made plans to go to NYU together. But they vowed to power through the distance, together, and to remain undeterred in face of adversity because they were Kevin and Connor—and Kevin and Connor could get through anything, together.

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“Hi, I’m Joey!” Kevin’s first year roommate greeted him excitedly, extending his hand.

“Oh, hi, I’m Kevin.” He smiled warmly, shaking Joey’s hand. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

The boys had all just been brought up to their dorm rooms at BYU, where they had been told to unpack their belongings and get settled in before going to the mandatory “meet and greet” orientation for all new freshman students.

“I see you got a ring there.” Joey grinned, pointing to Kevin’s left hand, where he wore the silver and purple promise ring Connor had given him. They had exchanged promise rings as a sort of going-away present—a promise they’d make it through all of this nonsense, through thick and through thin, together, and come back out of it even stronger than before.

“Are you engaged?” Joey asked.

“Oh, no, no. Not yet, anyway.” Kevin blushed, fiddling with the ring on his finger. “It’s more like a promise ring type of thing, I guess.”

“Like a chastity ring?” Joey asked excitedly. A bit too excitedly, for Kevin's taste. It was clear this guy was a big fan of the whole chastity ring concept.

“No, no, nothing like that.” Kevin shook his head, letting out a small laugh. Not that he and Connor had ever had full-on sex yet, but they had definitely done some...things together. “More like a promise that we’ll stay together and one day get married. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” Joey smiled, nodding, as he continued to unpack his suitcase. “That’s really cool. What’s her name?”

“Connor.” Kevin said, without thinking. Immediately, he froze. “Um—”

“No, no, nothing like that.” Kevin shook his head, letting out a small laugh. Not that he and Connor had ever had full-on sex yet, but they had definitely done some...things together. “More like a promise that we’ll stay together and one day get married. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” Joey smiled, nodding, as he continued to unpack his suitcase. “That’s really cool. What’s her name?”

“Connor.” Kevin said, without thinking. Immediately, he froze. “Um—”

“Connor?” Joey asked, confused. “Isn’t that a boy’s name?”

“No.” Kevin said, slowly. “Not in Irish. In Irish, it’s a girl’s name.” He faltered, not knowing how to get out of this. Dann his stupid mouth. “I mean, in Gaelic, sorry. It’s a Gaelic girl’s name. Not a boy. She’s not a boy. She is a female lady.” He stuttered, fearing the boy would see right through his lies. He felt his heart quicken, beating out of his chest. He hoped to God Joey would buy it. Please buy it.

“Ah, got it.” Joey nodded. “You nabbed yourself an Irish girl, huh?”

“Yeah.” Kevin sighed in relief. “Irish girl.”

Phew.

A while later, after they were all unpacked, Kevin sighed in exhaustion as he collapsed back onto his small twin bed, after chugging down a bottle of water.

“Oh, man, I better call Connor, he’s probably getting worried sick about me.” Kevin moaned tiredly, letting out a loud yawn. “I told him I’d check in around two and it’s already past seven.”

“Het?” Joey said, confused. “Did you just say he? I thought you said Connor was a girl? An Irish girl.” The boy scowled.

“She is.” Kevin stammered, his throat suddenly impossibly dry. He was sure his face was beet red by now. God, why did he have to keep screwing this up? She. Not he. She. This was Brigham Young
University, not their renegade mission hut in Uganda, for crying out loud. At this rate, he was going
to get himself expelled before ever even setting foot inside a classroom. Well, maybe not literally
expelled, but being gay at this university was not seen as a good thing. Not at all. There were a lot of
rules about touching and dating and from what he’d seen, there weren’t any resources for gay kids,
not even a gay straight alliance. He had to cool it with the Connor talk.

“I, um—I have, uh, I have dyslexia.” Kevin choked out an answer. “Yeah, dyslexia. It sometimes
makes me confuse my words, especially pronouns. I have to go to special classes and everything, It’s
really a pain in the ass—I mean, arse, to deal with.” Kevin coughed, looking down now. “I’ll try to
control it better from now on. I didn’t mean to worry you or anything. I’m not, um, I’m not
like...that.”

“Dyslexia.” Joey hummed, his brow creased. “Alright, if you say so.”

Kevin didn’t think he bought it that time.

And as it turned out, he didn’t.

“Staring’s not polite, you know.” Connor said, poking Kevin in the shoulder.

_Staring?_ Had he been staring?

“I wasn’t staring.” Kevin scowled as he turned away from looking at Chris and James, his cheeks
lightly blushed. “Where are the kids?” He asked, suddenly aware that he hadn’t been paying
attention to anything else other than the kissing couple for the past few minutes.

“Oh, they found Jasmine.” Connor pointed behind them with a big smile.

Kevin’s lips curled up as he watched Naba pick Harrison up into her arms, Arnold snapping a few
pictures of them with Jasmine from _Aladdin_. Charlie stood next to Naba, clinging to her leg.

“Allright, come on.” Connor said as he took Kevin’s arm, pulling him towards the group. “I know
you want a picture with Jasmine.”

“I don’t need a picture with Jasmine.” Kevin chuckled, trying (and failing) to take his arm back. “I’m
not a little kid, Connor.”

“Yes, you are.” Connor said. “And if I remember correctly, Jasmine is your…”, he squinted his eyes
for a moment, thinking, “second favorite Disney princess. Am I right?”

“I can’t believe you remember that.” Kevin said, quietly, after a moment.

“Your first favorite is Ariel and your third favorite is Anna.” He turned to Kevin, his eyes twinkling.
“Right?”

Kevin nodded, feeling his cheeks flush.

“Go on,” Connor prodded, giving him a gentle push towards Jasmine. “I’ll get a picture of you
guys.”

Kevin picked Charlie up into his arms and Connor snapped a few photos of them together with
Are you guys ready for *Splash Mountain*?” Kevin asked as he picked up his little girl and balanced her snugly onto his hip.

“Yeah!” She cried. “And I want Uncle Connor and Arnold to sit with us!”

“Oh.” Connor paled, slowing down his pace as they approached the line to the ride. “You know what, why don’t you guys just go? I’ll be fine here. Someone has to watch Harrison anyway, right?” He looked down at the little boy, who had been too afraid to go on any of the rides thus far.

“You go on the ride, Connor.” Naba waved him off. “I got him.”

“Oh…um…” Connor stammered, his cheeks flushed. “Naaah, I’m, uh…I’m really fine out here. You guys go on the ride. I’ll watch Harry for you.”

“Fun fact,” Kevin said to Charlie, an evil grin on his face, “Uncle Connor is *deathly* afraid of roller coasters.”

He’d said it loudly enough for everyone to hear, making the Elders, Naba and the little girl giggle at Connor’s expense.

“Even this one?” Naba chuckled. “Connor, it’s barely even a roller coaster.”

“It’s a log flume.” Kevin corrected her. “But in Connor’s mind, flumes still count as roller coasters.” He paused to give Connor a look. "Right?"

Connor narrowed his eyes at Kevin. “Looks like I’m not the only one with a good memory around here.”

“What?” Kevin asked, innocently. “It’s just payback for embarrassing me at breakfast.”

“Well,” Connor hummed, “just for that, maybe I will go on this ride.” He said, not without sticking his tongue out at Kevin for good measure.

“Yay!” Charlie cried.

“I mean, if all these little kids can do it, I can too, right?” The redhead reasoned, looking around at all the small kids with their parents. “Like that kid over there—he can’t possibly be older than four. If he can do it, so can I.” He nodded, trying to psyche himself up. “Yeah, I can do this.”

“Remember that time we went to Six Flags and you puked all over yourself on the Pirate Ship?” Kevin teased, making Charlie giggle. “That was fun, huh?”

“Once was getting even.” Connor said, hiding a small smile. “Twice is just being mean.”

“You’ll be okay, Uncle Connor.” Charlie beamed, patting the top of Connor’s head from her high
position balanced on Kevin’s hip. “My daddy will keep you nice and safe.”

The innocent comment from Charlie turned both men’s faces red, propelling them back into an uncomfortable silence as they waited on line for the ride.

“Oh, God, I don’t know about this.” Connor swallowed audibly, his eyes tightly closed, as their log-shaped coaster slowly approached the top of the first hill. “This is it. I’m gonna die. I’m gonna die right here in Disney World.”

“Oooh, maybe they’ll bury you next to the Haunted Mansion.” Kevin said, excitedly. “That way, when you become a ghost, you can haunt people for really reals.”

Connor let out a low growl. “Shut up.”

“No one dies at Disney World, you loon.” Arnold said.

“Yeah, it’s just a log flume, Con.” Chris chimed in. “I’m pretty sure no one’s ever died on a log flume.”

“Ugh, I feel sick.” Connor moaned in agony as he clutched the bar with all of his might, looking as though he feared he might die should he let it go. “Oh, no…no…this was such a bad idea, guys. I’m gonna be so sick.”

“I swear to God, you better not puke this time.” Kevin warned.

He was holding onto the bar with one hand with the other around Charlie. The little girl was wedged tightly in between Kevin and Connor, her little fingers wrapped around the bar across her lap.

“WEEEE!” Charlie yelled happily as they approached the top of the hill. "Uncle Connor, look! We're gonna gooo!"

“Ughhhhh.” Connor groaned. “I really hope this lap bar works.” He jiggled it a few times, just to make sure. "Oh, God. I'm gonna puke."

As the car flew down the first hill, Kevin could hear Connor screaming at the top of his lungs. It wasn’t a very big hill, but his scream was loud enough to startle Kevin. He instinctively reached across Charlie’s lap and gave Connor’s leg a comforting squeeze. By the time Kevin realized what he was doing, the ride was nearly over. As he anxiously retracted his hand from its place atop Connor’s thigh, he silently hoped the other man hadn’t noticed the gesture. He probably didn’t—he was too busy screaming his head off in terror, anyway.

As the car propelled down the final hill about a minute or so later, Connor screamed so unbelievably loud, Kevin thought his ears might explode. Finally, their flume car hit the pool at the bottom of the ride, splashing them with a healthy amount of water. Charlie squealed happily, lifting her hands up off the bar to touch the mist as it sprinkled down over them.

Kevin let out a laugh—a real, genuine laugh—as soon as the cool water hit his face. The man seated beside him was laughing now too, despite looking entirely disheveled—his red hair winded, wet and
“You didn’t pee yourself, did you?” Kevin asked, a shit-eating grin on his face. “I have pull-ups in my backpack if you need them.”

The redhead just glared at Kevin, water dripping down his rosy, freckled cheeks.

“No.” Connor said dryly, clearly not amused by Kevin’s quip, “I did not pee myself, Kevin.”

“Alright, alright.” Kevin grinned. “Just checking.”

“You put your hand on my leg.” Connor said, nonchalantly, as they stepped out of the car.

The directness of the comment startled Kevin a bit. Well, maybe more than a bit.

“Wha—what?”

“You put your hand on my leg.” Connor repeated, slower this time. “What was that all about?”

“Oh, I, um—I was just trying to calm you down, that’s all.” Kevin said, quietly, his cheeks flushed in embarrassment. “You were screaming like a banshee back there.”

“Ah.” Connor just smiled with that same smug smile he always seemed to have on his face.

Kevin absolutely hated that smile.

It was around two o’clock in the afternoon now and it was hot—very, very hot—and Connor’s pale, freckled skin wasn’t faring too well.

Everybody was sitting down on a bench, munching on rapidly-melting ice cream cones. Well, everyone except for Connor. He was standing up, dousing his body in sunscreen spray for about the tenth time in the past two hours.

He muttered something under his breath as he sprayed the back of his legs, which were now a noticeably bright red.

“Can someone get my back?” Connor asked, visibly frustrated. “Chris? I can literally feel it burning me through the shirt.”

As Connor yanked his shirt off, so Chris could apply the sunscreen to his back, he could see the bright red blush that had bloomed on Kevin’s face. Chris was spraying his (probably-gross) body down with a copious amount of sunscreen, so Connor couldn’t really understand how anyone could possibly find his body even remotely attractive in its current state—his skin blotched red with burns, sunscreen and sweat dripping all over it, but the blush and discomfort on Kevin’s face was unmistakable.

Interesting, Connor thought to himself as Chris finished spraying him. He made a mental note to get Chris’s opinion on this development later on. That and the leg thing.

“Uncle Connor?” Charlie asked curiously, visibly concerned about the amount of sunscreen Connor seemed to require. “Why do you need so much sunscreen?”
“Are you a vampire?” Harrison chimed in, seeming intrigued at the prospect. “I bet you’re a vampire!”

“No, hun, I’m not a vampire.” Connor corrected him. “Just Irish.”

“’Cause vampires can’t be in the sun for too long,” Harrison continued, “or else they get all red and wrinkly and then they die. Watch.” He proceeded to act out what a dying vampire might look like, pretending to shrivel up and collapse to the ground. He hopped up after a moment, his face all smiles. “See?”

Connor raised an eyebrow at Arnold as if to ask: What the Hell are you teaching this kid?

Kevin’s skin, on the contrary to Connor’s, was healthily tanned, darkened only slightly by the day’s sunlight. He was sitting on the bench next to his daughter, eating a triple-scoop chocolate chip mint ice cream cone, some of which was dribbling down his chin and landing in his lap. He looked pretty cute like that and if he had been any other man other than Kevin, Connor may have considered flirting with him. Well, maybe he’d flirt with him anyway.

“Well, it’s nice to know some things never change.” Connor smirked, handing Kevin a napkin from his pocket. The other man looked highly confused. “Your face is covered in ice cream, Kevin.”

“Yeah, well, your face is covered in…”, Kevin scowled, trying to think of a good comeback as he wiped the ice cream drippings off his chin, “…sunscreen.” He finished sheepishly, clearly not very happy with his choice of retort.

“Guys, you wanna head over to Epcot?” James asked after a moment, wiping the sweat from his brow. The group had dinner reservations that night in Epcot, where they were planning to close out the night with the fireworks show over the lake. “I don’t know about you, but I could definitely use some beers around the world right about now.”

“I second that!” Davis said, excitedly.

“I wholeheartedly third that.” Connor beamed. “Onward!”

As they strolled through Germany, the sun had finally begun to recede a little and Connor started to feel almost normal again. He washed the sunscreen and sweat off his face in one of the bathrooms and sprayed on some cologne—because you never knew when you might run into a handsome guy and Connor wanted to at least appear somewhat attractive. He combed back his hair in the mirror and tried his best to fluff it up a little. He didn’t want to admit to himself that, deep down, he also wanted to look good for Kevin. More so than that, he wanted Kevin to get a good, long look at what he’d been missing out on all these years—what he’d so carelessly thrown away years before.

They all sat outside together on one of the patios in front of one of the many Belgian beer gardens in the German section of the park, all of the Elders sharing small appetizers of sausage and bratwurst and beers to tide them over until they went to dinner later.

“Hey, there.” A foreign-sounding guy came up to Connor after about an hour and gestured to their table. He sounded Swedish or Norwegian or something like that. “May I?”

Connor’s eyes lit up immediately at the sight of this man. He was tall, strong, blonde and had some
“Please do.” Connor smiled shyly and scooted over on the bench, so the man could sit down. “I’m Connor.”

“Sven.” The man said, sweetly lifting Connor’s hand and giving the top of it a small kiss. “How are you enjoying Epcot so far?”

As he talked with this man, who seemed to be taking quite an interest in him, Connor caught Kevin’s eye from the other end of the table. Kevin’s gaze was piercing and unwavering. He looked almost…annoyed. More than annoyed—he looked positively angry.

Kevin had no right to be angry, Connor thought to himself in a huff—not anymore, anyway—not since he’d made it clear there was nothing left to salvage between them. Still—Connor found he desperately wanted him to be jealous. He liked it. He wanted to show Kevin what a great catch he was—a great catch that he’d been missing out on. He wanted to play dirty, wanted revenge, wanted some kind of catharsis. Well, okay, that was all a lie. What he really wanted was Kevin, all of Kevin, all to himself—but he’d take that look on Kevin’s face, the look of longing and anger and frustration, as a pretty decent consolation prize.

He listened to Sven talk for a bit—that beautiful accent of his, positively hypnotic. Connor was suddenly very interested in twirling his hair around in his fingers as he gazed into Sven’s bright blue eyes. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Kevin’s eyebrows crease, disapprovingly, from the other side of the table. He knew that Kevin knew what his hair twirl meant. It meant he was flirting.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help but notice…”, Sven said, pointing to Connor’s tote bag that had a gay pride patch sewn onto the side. “Sorry if I’m being too forward, I just assumed you were…you know.”

“Not too forward at all.” Connor shook his head. “And I am. Wanna go get a drink?” He shook his cup. “I need a refill.”

“I’ll buy you one.” Sven beamed, taking Connor by the hand and leading him towards the bar. Connor followed him with a shy smile on his face, not without sneaking a quick look back at Kevin, to make sure he saw—Kevin did not look happy.

“What the Hell does he think he’s doing?” Kevin bellowed angrily to Arnold as they went back up to get more drinks. “He’s acting completely inappropriate in front of Charlie and Harry, talking to that strange guy. We don’t know anything about him, Arnold. He could be a serial killer or a thief or a rapist or a—“

“Yeaaaah, I really don’t think so, Kev.” Arnold said, cutting him off. “He seems pretty cool to me.”

“You don’t know that, Arnold.” Kevin said. “He’s a complete stranger.”

“I really don’t see the big deal, bud.” His friend shook his head. “So what if Connor’s flirting with some guy? He’s totally single. He’s on vacation. He wants to have fun. You won’t ask him out, so what do you expect him to do? Be celibate for the rest of his life?”

“No.” Kevin huffed, not liking how much sense Arnold was making. “But he’s setting a bad example for my daughter.” He lied.
“Wow.” Arnold snorted. “That’s ridiculous and you know it. The guy’s allowed to flirt, Kevin. Why do you even care?” He paused a moment, feigning surprise. “Unless…Kevin, could you actually be…jealous?”

“No!” Kevin snapped. “Of course not. I don’t care what Connor does with his body. If he wants to act like a slut, he can act like a slut. I don’t care. Do I look like I care?”

“Yes.” Arnold said. “But, first of all, letting a guy buy him a drink at Epcot is not being a slut, Kev. Like, not even a little bit.”

“Fine.” Kevin sighed.

He was already regretting ever bringing this up with Arnold—Arnold, who was always trying to convince him that he still had feelings for Connor McKinley.

“And second of all, you are so insanely jealous it’s ridiculous.” Arnold said, wrapping an arm around Kevin’s shoulder. “Like, crazy ridiculous.”

“Alright, I’m done talking about this.” Kevin huffed, detangling himself from Arnold’s friendly grasp. “Clearly, no one seems to understand why I have such a problem with this. It’s not safe. He’s setting a bad example for my daughter and, on top of that, does nobody else care that he completely ditched us to go hang out with a total stranger?”

“The only one who doesn’t seem to understand what’s going on is you, dude.” Arnold said. “You love him and you don’t want him getting hit on by some other guy. I get it. He’s your ex. Your ex who you still have feelings for.”

“Shut up, Arnold.” Kevin sighed, handing the bartender money in exchange for their next round of drinks. “I’m sorry I even mentioned it.”

“You seriously have no right to be mad at him for talking to some guy just because you refuse to do anything about your feelings. He has every right to go along with Mr. Swedish over there.” He pointed to Connor, who was sitting at the bar not too far from them, still twirling his hair around his fingers, talking with the man in question.

“His name is Sven.” Kevin let out a low growl. “What a stupid name that is…Sven.”

“Wait, isn’t one of the characters in Frozen named Sven?” Arnold asked. “You love Frozen.”

“You’re right.” Kevin said with a nod, as though he hadn’t considered this before. “I’ll bet you anything that’s not even his real name. I’ll bet it’s just his fake pick-up name that he uses in places like Epcot where you’d expect to meet a foreign gay man named Sven. His real name is probably Doug or Jimmy or Bob. I’ll bet his accent isn’t even real.”

“You’re going off the deep end, dude.” Arnold said. “Time to go.”

“He could be a predator, Arnold. A lying, two-faced predator.” Kevin glanced back at Connor. “Should I do something?”


“Do not.”

“Do too.” Arnold said, pulling Kevin back outside, drink in hand. “Let’s get out of here before you start a brawl or something.”
It was about to be Connor’s first visit to BYU and Kevin was losing his mind. He was so freakin’ excited, he thought he might vomit. All he could think about for the past few weeks was seeing Connor—how he couldn’t wait to hold him and talk to him (even though they talked on the phone literally every single night, but it just wasn’t the same) and touch him everywhere, and kiss him and just be with him nonstop for the next week he would be in Utah. Kevin had even planned to ditch a couple of classes and Church services that week just because of Connor. Kevin was a straight-A student so that wasn’t something he took lightly, either.

“Remember, your name is Henry.” Kevin whispered to Connor as he brought him up to his dorm room, where Kevin was going to gather his things for their hotel stay that night. He needed to do a load of laundry too and a few other chores before they left for the week. Since Joey wouldn’t have any idea that Connor was actually Connor, Kevin figured they would be fine, as long as they stuck to the plan.

“Got it.” Connor whispered back. “I still think it’s insane that I have to use a fake name though, Kev. What kind of place is this? Nazi Germany?”

Kevin rolled his eyes with a smile. “You, of all people, should know. We were both raised the exact same way.”

“I know, but I thought we’d gotten past all that. Remember?” Connor reminded him. “This is seriously creepy and weird.”

“It’ll only be for a little while longer.” Kevin whispered, holding Connor's hand for an illicit moment, since they were all alone in the hallway. “And I've, um, I’ve actually been thinking of maybe transferring to NYU next year.”

Connor's eyes widened. “Really?” He whispered, seemingly in shock.

“Really.” Kevin said, meaning it. “I’ve already downloaded all the applications and everything.”

“But what about your parents?” Connor asked, worriedly. “They said they would—“

“Screw my parents.” Kevin whispered, hotly, inching closer to Connor’s face. He let out a little laugh, making Connor laugh too. “I love you, Connor, and this distance sucks. It sucks so much. It’s harder than I ever thought it would be. And I miss you, all the time, I miss you, and I hate it.”

“I hate it too.”

“So I think we should fix it, don’t you?” Kevin beamed, making Connor grin stupidly from ear to ear. Kevin looked around for a moment, just to make sure no one was watching before he did what he was about to do. He leaned in and gave Connor a warm, wet kiss, their lips brushing together, magic, a magic he hadn’t felt in far too long. A magic he wanted to feel all the time.

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“Hey, Joey, this is Henry. Henry, this is Joey, my roommate.” Kevin gestured to Connor as they entered his dorm room. Connor extended his hand for a polite hello and Joey was kind and cordial to him. They talked for a while about school and classes and things of that nature before Kevin and Connor left to go to the hotel. Kevin had lied to Joey and said he would be staying with his aunt for the next few days, an aunt who lived close by the university in Provo.

They then spent seven amazing days together and Kevin was sick to his stomach about having to go
back to a life without Connor. *Temporarily*, he reminded himself, *temporarily without Connor. This is all just for now.*

When Kevin entered his dorm room a week later, after dropping Connor at the airport, he found Joey glaring at him, coldly.

“Hi, Kevin.” He said, coolly. "Have a nice trip?"

“Hey, man.” Kevin said, his voice unsure, as he dropped his backpack to the floor and went to unpack. “How’s it going?”

“Dyslexic people don’t mix up their pronouns.” Joey spat at him, standing up now to face him. “And Connor isn’t a girl’s name in Gaelic.”

Kevin froze. He just froze there in place, not knowing what the Hell was going on.

“What?” Kevin sputtered, shifting a bit in place, faltering. “Of course it is.”

“I’m not an idiot, you know.” Joey rolled his eyes, sneering a bit. “I know how to use Google, Kevin.”

Kevin swallowed hard, closing his eyes. He felt sick. He felt as though he was literally going to puke.

“And I know that guy’s name isn’t Henry.” Joey continued. “And I’m pretty sure I know exactly what you were doing with him. You were sinning. You were sinning with Connor. That is his name, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Kevin said, his throat parched. “How’d you find out?”

“I looked through your Facebook while you were away, trying to find Henry, figured I’d add him as a friend, and there I see a picture of Connor McKinley who happened to look an awful lot like Henry.” Joey spat, angrily.

Kevin swallowed hard. “I can explain, Joey. It’s not like you think. I’m a good person. I can—I can explain all of this…”

“I’m requesting a room transfer.” Joey said, flatly. “And don’t think I’m not going to tell them exactly why.”

“I’ll be staying in Norman’s dorm until they can find you another roommate.”” Joey said, firmly. “One who doesn’t mind…this.” He waved his hand, shaking his head. “Goodbye, Kevin.”

Joey left, slamming the door.

Kevin cried. He didn’t know what else to do. He wanted to tell Connor all about what happened, but he didn’t want to worry him or make him feel responsible or guilty for it either. He ended up calling Connor anyway, just to hear his voice, but he didn’t tell him what happened with Joey. He just
needed to hear the sound of Connor’s voice. Kevin asked him to stay on the phone with him that night until he fell asleep. He did, of course.

It calmed Kevin down just enough to fall sleep that night.

Later that night, after dinner, the group was gathered by the lake at Epcot to watch the fireworks. Connor had the nerve to bring Sven along with them to dinner, so Kevin had been forced to not only be civil to the man, but also listen as he babbled on and on, endlessly. Oh, Kevin learned all about Sven—about his family, his siblings, his favorite color, his favorite food, the fact that he was, apparently, born in Sweden and was on vacation to Disney World with his mother and little brother.

Arnold had been right about one thing though—the man certainly didn’t seem like a predator or a sleaze. That judgment may have been made in haste. But one thing was for certain—Kevin sure as heck didn’t like him. He didn’t like his accent or his money or the way he looked at Connor, in that way—as though Connor was a piece of meat, just waiting to be devoured. Arnold disagreed. He thought he just looked like he had a crush. Connor seemed to spend so much time looking at Kevin looking at Sven that he didn’t know what Connor thought. He certainly seemed to like Sven though. And that made weird things happen inside of Kevin’s brain—like hating Sven for no good reason.

Kevin was holding Charlie’s hand as they picked out their glow sticks and light-up Mickey ears with Naba and Harrison for the fireworks show. As they walked back over to meet up with the rest of the group, Charlie ran over to show Harrison her new glow sticks. Kevin was surprised to see Connor standing back with the group—alone, sans Sven.

“What happened to Sven?” Kevin asked, snidely. Secretly, he was relieved to see Sven was nowhere in sight.

“Oh, nothing happened.” Connor said, the smug smile back on his face. “He had to go back to the hotel and meet his mom.” He cocked his head to the side, giving Kevin a long, curious gaze.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Kevin said, shifting uncomfortably in place. “You two seemed to be hitting it off pretty well. I just assumed you’d probably go back to his hotel room or something.”

“Wow.” Connor laughed darkly, shaking his head.

“What?”

“You actually think I’d leave you guys to go sleep with some random stranger I just met off the street—at Disney World of all places?” Connor asked, clearly annoyed at Kevin’s assumption about his promiscuity.

“How should I know what you do nowadays?” Kevin barked, a little louder than necessary. “You sure seemed to be getting pretty friendly with him. His hands were all over your—“

“Shush.” Connor nudged him. “We are literally surrounded by children right now.”

Kevin sighed and tried to put Sven out of his mind. Sven and his stupid name and his stupid accent and his stupid blue eyes.
“And just for the record,” Connor leaned in close to Kevin’s ear, his voice a soft whisper, “I wouldn’t have slept with someone I’ve known for less than two hours, Kevin.” Pausing for a moment, he turned back to face the fireworks. “Not that it’s any of your business, anyway.”

“What’s the magic number then?” Kevin whispered, louder than necessary. “Three hours? Four?”

“You’re the one who broke up with me, remember?” Connor reminded him, still gazing at the fireworks display. “You have no right to be jealous, Kevin. Not anymore.”

“For the love of God, I am not jealous.” Kevin said in a huff. “Why does everyone keep saying that? I don’t even like men like that. Not anymore, anyway.”

“Right.” Connor nodded. “Because that’s something super easy to just,” he snapped his fingers in the air, “turn off, right?”

Kevin sighed. He was so tired of this. Tired of Connor. Tired of always ending up in a fight with Connor. Tired of always ending up in the same fight with Connor, neither of them ever willing to back down. This game was exhausting.

“Can’t a friend be concerned about another friend without it being jealousy?” Kevin asked, softly.

“Oh, are we friends now?”

“You know what I mean.”

Connor shook his head, a bemused smile on his face. “Just shut up and watch the fireworks.”

By the time they got home from the park, everyone felt utterly exhausted. Well, all of the adults, at least. Connor’s skin was burned to a crisp (SPF 100 just didn’t cut it at Disney, apparently) and his feet ached to high heaven. The suite he was sharing with Kevin and the Cunninghams was the biggest out of them all, so it was quickly becoming the central hangout for the group. All of the Elders were all sitting around the kitchen table, laughing and talking. They had all brought alcohol, snacks, and sodas over which were spread out on the counter.

“Are we feeling like mudslides, margaritas or wine?” Connor asked the group. He had worked as a bartender for a while when he was out of acting work in New York City, so whenever they got together, he always took the reigns making drinks.

“Wine!” Davis shouted over the laughter.

“Mudslides!” Someone else called out.

“Margaritas!”

“Okay, so everything.” Connor said, grinning. “Got it.”

“This is like a giant sleepover party!” He heard Charlie cry out in glee as she took to jumping up and down on Connor’s couch bed in the living room, making him smile. His smile faded a bit as he watched Kevin wander over and take a seat on the couch, on the other side of the room, alone.

“We should play a game or something.” Michaels suggested to the group, pulling out a deck of cards
and shuffling like a pro. “How about some Texas Hold ‘Em with a buy-in of twenty?”

After Connor poured a round of drinks for everyone who opted in to play poker with Michaels, he wandered over to where Kevin was sitting, alone, engrossed with something on his cell phone.

“Let me guess.” Connor said, smirking, as he took a seat on the couch next to Kevin, curling his legs underneath him. “You still don’t drink—even though we all know that’s kind of a lie—you don’t have sex, at least if Arnold’s intel is up to date, and you certainly don’t gamble.” He paused a moment. “Am I right?”

Kevin let out a small chuckle at his own expense. “That’s right.”

“Well, aren’t you just a saint.” Connor said dryly, taking a long, slow sip of his wine—red wine, of course. It was his favorite.

He sighed after a moment, thinking about what Kevin’s life must have been like now. Not only was he a single dad, raising a kid all alone, but he seemed to also still be suppressing his sexuality, even after all these years. It seemed as though Kevin never even let himself have any fun anymore, at least if any of what Arnold had told him was true.

“Doesn’t it get a little boring after a while?” Connor asked, meaning it. “Being such a goody goody Mormon again, I mean.”

“Some of us have actual responsibilities, you know. I work all day and take care of Charlie whenever I’m not working.” Kevin sighed. “I don’t really have time to be bored.”

“But where’s the fun? Where’s the relaxation?” Connor asked, not understanding how anyone could possibly live that way and not go completely insane. “You must feel the urge to cut loose once in awhile, no?” He paused for a moment. “I mean, you are still human, right? The Mormon Church didn’t turn you into a robot or a mindless drone or anything like that, did they?”

Kevin just turned and glared at him, clearly not amused in the slightest.

“Well, I belong to a really active online parenting forum.” Kevin said, hopefully. “We have a lot of fun on there. We even did a Secret Santa exchange last year. That was pretty cool.” He paused for a moment and Connor could see him racking his brain, probably trying to remember the last time he’d done anything remotely fun. “Oh and Arnold and Naba come over all the time. We play board games and watch movies and stuff.”

When Kevin didn’t add anything else to the list, Connor just shook his head. “That’s it? That’s your entire social life?”

“Pretty much.” Kevin said sadly, as though he’d just realized, for the very first time, how pathetic it all sounded.

“Arnold, Naba and some randos on the internet?”

“Yes.” Kevin said with a sigh, clearly getting more annoyed at Connor’s nosiness.

The redhead thought to himself for a moment before bumping his shoulder into Kevin's.
“Alright, I have an idea. Why don't you let me make you a virgin mudslide—I'm assuming you still love chocolate, right?—and then we can check out that giant pile of board games you brought with you.” Connor suggested with what he hoped was a warm, inviting smile. “I'm sure that'll be a lot more fun than sulking over here in the corner playing Words with Friends by yourself.”

“How do you know I was playing Words with Friends?” Kevin asked, seeming a bit self-conscious.

“I can see it on your phone, dummy.” Connor pointed, a cheeky smile on his face. “By the way, you have a really good triple word score opportunity right,” he pointed to the board on his phone, “here. Oxen—forty-four points.”

“I would’ve gotten it.” Kevin said, flustered, as he promptly shut his phone off.

“Sure.” Connor smirked. “Come on, what do you say?” He asked, bumping his shoulder into Kevin again.

He may have been feeling slightly tipsy from that glass of wine he’d downed just a bit too quickly. He only ever got this touchy-feely with Kevin nowadays when he had alcohol in his system. Mostly because he knew it made Kevin uncomfortable, not because he didn't want to. The only times Kevin ever reciprocated were when they were both drunk, like at Davis's wedding, but even then, it never seemed to end very well.

“If I recall correctly, we never did finish our last game of Scrabble.” Connor added.

“You mean from six years ago?” Kevin raised his eyebrows, a small smile tugging at his lips.

“Yes. And if my memory serves me correctly, you were actually winning for once.” Connor teased, bravely giving him a little shove. Kevin groaned but Connor could see a tiny, almost non-existent smile on his face.

“Come on, play with me.” Connor continued, his voice softer now. “Just one game? I don’t really like poker and, believe it or not, I have actually missed you for the past two years, Kevin Price.”

The other man paused for a moment.

“Really?” Kevin finally asked, quietly.

Connor didn’t miss how wide the brunette’s eyes had gotten and he certainly didn’t miss the sad glint shining over them either.

“Really.” Connor answered, honestly, because it was the truth.

It had always been the truth. Always. Despite all of the hurt he’d caused Connor over the past few years, it had always remained the truth.

Sure, Connor had dated other men after Kevin. Plenty of other men, in fact. But he’d never fallen in love with any of them. None of them had ever given him that feeling, that special, most wonderful, heart-fluttering feeling that Kevin had always given him. Even now, even though Kevin was older and clearly had a lot of emotional issues he was still dealing with—whatever they were—he still gave Connor that feeling inside, that feeling he’d never felt with anybody else but Kevin Price.

Connor tried, with all of his might, to remember why they didn’t work out the first time, tried to feel all over again, to remember all of the pain Kevin Price had made him feel before. There had been an insurmountable amount of pain to overcome, after the break up. But that didn’t seem to matter now, not now, not while Kevin was right here, in front of him, looking so sad and distant and alone.
Connor wasn’t sure what thoughts were running through Kevin’s mind, but one thing was for sure—he was definitely holding back, holding something back. He was holding so much back. Just like he was holding something back, over six years ago, when he mysteriously left Connor out of nowhere—leaving him confused, alone, vulnerable and heartbroken.

Kevin fidgeted uncomfortably for a moment or two before nervously standing up. He ran a shaky hand through his hair.

“I really need to get Charlie to bed.” He finally choked out. “It’s way past her bedtime and I’m exhausted. Maybe some other time, okay?”

“Oh, don’t forget.” Connor said, his face positively lighting up. Kevin wasn’t getting off the hook so easily tonight. “Your little one has so graciously invited me to attend story time tonight.” He grinned, knowing full well the discomfort he was causing Kevin. “I’m assuming story time happens at bedtime, yeah?”

The tired dad just groaned. “Don’t remind her, please. I’m hoping she forgot.” He walked over to where Charlie was playing, scooping her up into his arms. “Come on, kiddo, time for bed.”

“Uncle Connor!” Charlie cried out. “Are you still coming over for story time?”

Kevin’s face instantly soured, much to Connor’s delight.

“You bet I am.” Connor said, standing up with a giant grin. He turned to Kevin and tapped the now-empty wine glass in his hand. “This heathen’s gonna need another glass of wine though, to make it all the way through story time.”

Kevin just rolled his eyes.

The redhead leaned in and gave Charlie a small kiss on the cheek. “Give me five minutes and I’ll meet you in there, deal?”

He held up his hand so Charlie could give him a high five. She did.

“Deal!”

“Okay, which book do you want tonight?” Kevin asked as he snuggled up next to Charlie in her big bed. "’Mickey Mouse and his Spaceship’ or ‘Pluto’s Bad Idea’?”

“Pluto’s Bad Idea!” Charlie cried. “Uncle Connor, do you know that one?”

“I do not.” Connor said with a smile before taking a sip of his wine. “But I can’t wait to hear it.”

Connor was sat at the little round table in Kevin and Charlie’s bedroom that was near the end of the bed. He had a fresh glass of wine in one hand and was picking at cheese and crackers with the other. He was all set for the big show. He figured he’d have a quiet little chuckle at Kevin’s expense, maybe even mildly pick on him at breakfast the next morning or something, and simultaneously make Charlie happy at the same time. It was a win-win for sure.

But when Kevin started reading the story aloud to his daughter and doing all the voices, Connor didn’t chuckle. The happiness on Kevin's face and on Charlie’s made him feel a bunch of weird
emotions. There was the emotion of simply being touched by the scene in front of him. The sheer love on Kevin’s face—the unconditional, gigantic love for his daughter, which was so apparent when he read her the story—was enough to melt Connor’s heart. She was his entire world, it seemed. Then there was a prickling of jealousy too—only because having a child together was once one of their dreams, together, he and Kevin. And now he had all of that, without him. Then there was the realization that he was getting older, too, and that he had yet to find someone to replace the love he once had with Kevin. Was it getting too late? Would he ever find someone in time to adopt a child? So many feelings, he felt, inside, as he watched on at the scene in front of him.

“And then Mickey found out about Pluto’s plan and he said, ‘Ohh no! We’re really in for it this time, aren’t we?’” Kevin said, in Mickey’s voice, and Charlie laughed hysterically because Kevin’s Mickey Mouse voice was really, really funny and, Connor thought, quite on point too. “Then Minnie came over and wanted to know what was wrong. Do you know what was wrong?” He asked, to Charlie, a big grin on his face.

“No, tell me!”

“Well, the problem was that Pluto had come up with a terrible idea. I mean, it was just awful. He thought it would be a good idea to steal all of Donald’s clothes and hide them under the bed! Do you think that was a good idea?” He asked Charlie, expectantly.

“No!” She squealed.

“Right. Donald didn’t think so either.” Kevin said, making a funny face, and Connor knew he was ad-libbing most of the story and going off-book, probably because he knew Charlie had heard this same story so many times before and Kevin wanted to keep it fresh.

“He said, ‘Who took all my clothes? I can’t find them anywhere!’” Kevin recited, in Donald Duck’s voice, making Charlie giggle again.

After a few minutes of watching the pair, Connor realized tears had started to run down his face. He didn’t know why, but he knew he couldn’t let Kevin see them. He just couldn’t. Not now, not here. He quietly snuck out of the room, as unobtrusively as possible, hoping they didn’t see him.

He just hoped Charlie wouldn’t miss him too much.
Chapter 4: Taciturn

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The few weeks following the incident with his ex-roommate, Joey, were not pleasant ones for Kevin. He had been sent down to the Honor Code office to explain himself and his actions after Joey snitched on him for “sneaking off to a hotel with a boy”.

The Honor Code office ended up not taking any disciplinary action against Kevin though, thank God, since none of the supposed “illicit” activities took place on campus and they had no actual evidence of the supposed encounter.

Joey, being the exemplary Mormon that he was, couldn’t lie to the counselors. He admitted to them that although he suspected Kevin and his “boyfriend” were engaging in sinful activities off-campus, he didn’t actually witness any of it on campus, not even something as innocent as hugging or hand holding.

So the case was dismissed, much to Kevin’s relief.

Kevin’s parents were still immediately notified of the ordeal though which, of course, did not go well. They came to the school and took him out to dinner, where all they did was repeatedly scold and reprimand him. The threats came in hot and without mercy. He nodded, of course, and did his best to try and appease them. He was growing weary of arguing with them. He figured it was best to just go along with it, in hopes they’d leave him alone. Lying by omission, he supposed, was the safest way to navigate this mess. Lying by omission to his parents, lying by omission to Connor—it would just make all of it so much easier to deal with, wouldn’t it? It had always worked for him as a kid, so why not now? So he just nodded to his parents and he mentioned nothing of it to Connor.

He was, however, forced to attend a few follow-up counseling sessions at the Honor Code office, where he tried his best to keep calm and not curse them all out into oblivion.

You just need to get through this year, he kept telling himself, over and over again. The hopeful statement was quickly becoming his new mantra. Besides, at least you didn’t get expelled.
That wasn’t to say Kevin wasn’t ostracized for his actions, though. He was.

Despite not getting kicked out of school or forced to do extensive counselling or community service, word soon spread around the student body that Kevin Price was gay. A gay sinner. A gay sinner who took his “boyfriend” to seedy hotels in the middle of the night in order to engage in acts of sodomy.

But that couldn’t have been further from the truth, Kevin thought to himself. That wasn’t even close to the truth.

He and Connor loved each other and even though they did engage in some sexual activity (without going ‘all the way’, of course—Kevin still wasn’t quite ready for that yet), it was always out of love and closeness and affection. Of course, it did feel good too, but it certainly never felt wrong or sinful or dirty to them, not even for a couple of ex-Mormons from Salt Lake City, Utah, who were raised rather strictly.

The kids at BYU all had the wrong idea and now his good name was being besmirched across the entire campus—all thanks to the runaway imagination of that hotshot Mormon goody two shoes, Joey.

Joey.

Kevin was starting to really hate Joey.

It was because of Joey that Kevin Price, always the exemplary and well-liked student, was now getting pointed at, shoved, picked on, laughed at...

It was all so humiliating. Never before in his entire life had Kevin Price been looked upon with such contempt.

But the worst was when people would simply shake their heads at him, as though they pitied him—pitied his identity, pitied his soul, pitied...him. That was the worst feeling of them all, being pitied like that.

Three years prior to this whole thing, no one would have ever dared look at Kevin that way, with pity in their eyes. Not back when Kevin was a bonafide super Mormon, back when his friends were all jealous and his parents were proud of him.

Those were good days in the life of Kevin Price, back then.

Kevin, unfortunately, still saw Joey around campus. They had a couple of classes together and Kevin would occasionally pass him by in the dining hall. Joey was the seeming embodiment of everything Kevin Price had once been—had been back then. The guy had hoards of friends, all of whom looked up to him. He was a straight-A student and never missed a class. He was constantly being bathed in adulation and adoration by his friends and professors.

It all made Kevin feel sick to his stomach.

Whenever Kevin looked at Joey, he felt as though he were looking at a lost, dated version of himself—a version of himself from three years ago, a version of himself that could have been. Joey was everything Kevin used to be—the perfect Mormon, the perfect son, the perfect student, the perfect everything.

These days, Kevin Price was just looked upon with disdain, albeit sometimes with a strange curiosity, as though he were an unusual artifact at a museum, but worse than all of that was when
they’d look at him with pity.

That one hurt the most. It hurt more than anything.

And it was the one he just couldn’t seem to get used to.

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Charlie had finally fallen asleep after a couple of read-alouds of her bedtime story, “Pluto’s Bad Idea”. At some point during the story, Charlie had cried out to Kevin that her Uncle Connor wasn’t there anymore. He’d vacated his seat at the table, leaving his wine and cheese behind. Kevin told his daughter that her Uncle Connor probably just had to use the bathroom and that she didn’t need to worry. Soon after, the little girl fell fast asleep, curled up against Kevin’s side. The tired dad laid there a while, snuggled up against Charlie, waiting. He waited and waited and waited for Connor to return, but he never did.

Kevin tried not to care. He really did. After all, he didn’t even want Connor to join them for their little bedtime story ritual in the first place. Having Connor sitting there, watching on as he and Charlie had what he considered to be their special bonding time, felt somewhat invasive. And, yet, still, Kevin was curious. Why did Connor just get up and leave like that right in the middle of the story, leaving his food and wine behind? Kevin may not have known much about Connor's life these days, but he did know how Connor felt about Charlie. In the mere two days they'd spent together here at Disney World, it was clear how much warmth and affection Connor had for his little girl. He could see it plain as day in Connor's eyes.

Shaking his head, Kevin decided to just get in the shower and wash up. He ached to get all of the sunscreen and sweat and any other ickies that had caked themselves onto his body during the day, off of him.

As he stepped into the shower, which he had been forced to share with Connor, as there were only two bathrooms in the suite, his eye caught sight of Connor’s pink and purple soaps and scented body washes and other random toiletries sitting on the little shelf. He smiled to himself, without meaning to, as he picked one of them up and turned it over in his hand. Kevin knew that Connor adored taking long, relaxing bubble baths and things of that nature. At one time, Kevin had even enjoyed taking said bubble baths with him. It wasn’t even usually sexual in nature, when they’d take baths together, but rather it was just some kind of quiet, intimate, soul-sharing activity they both enjoyed doing together every once in a while—back when they were together.

Placing the item back onto it’s shelf, Kevin sighed and tried not to think about it. He tried really hard not to think about it. But being here, in this small space, with Connor, was making it nearly impossible not to think about it—about him, about them—about all of the things he’d once forced himself to stop thinking about. It was a strange situation, he’d found himself in, here, with Connor.

As he stepped out of the shower, he overheard a loud noise coming from the kitchenette, like a small crash of some kind. He didn’t think the other Elders would still be over since it was—he glanced down at his watch—already well past one in the morning. Throwing on one of the many Disney tee shirts he used for pajamas and a pair of blue boxer shorts, he hesitantly stepped out of the bedroom to see what was going on, closing the door softly behind him as to not wake Charlie.

As he stepped out into the hallway, he was taken aback by the sight in front of him. Connor, who was admittedly clad in a rather cute oversized tee shirt and shorts that were just a wee bit too short for
any straight guy to get away with, was sitting alone at the table. He had a heftily filled wine glass to
the left of him and, what looked to be a now-scattered game of solitaire, to his right.

Kevin jolted back when he heard the sound of a sharp intake of breath, nearly a gasp, coming from
Connor, followed quickly by a loud sniffle. Was Connor...crying?

Kevin knew full well that he could have—should have—just left. He could have just left and
escaped the room, undetected, as Connor had not yet noticed his presence. He could have just left
and then Connor would have never had to know that Kevin had seen him crying, out there, in the
kitchen, alone. Kevin would have never even had to mention it. It could have all gone unreported
and unspoken.

Besides, Kevin sure as heck wasn’t obligated to say anything comforting to the man or try to help
him in any way, was he? No, he wasn’t. He truly, honestly wasn’t. He and Connor had been broken
up for years now. Not only that, but they were barely even friends anymore. All they did nowadays
was teeter on the border of friendship, but then usually a fight would get in the way of that and it
would collapse and then they’d be forced to start all over again. That was how it always went with
them, these days.

And yet, still, for some strange reason, he did feel compelled to go out there, to say something, to do
something, anything, to find out what was wrong with Connor. He wanted to know what was
wrong. He wanted to see if he could help. Why that was, he honestly didn’t know.

“Hey.” Kevin called out, softly, as he walked into the kitchen. “Everything okay out here?”

Connor bolted upright, his bright red face abruptly forced out of its languished position, buried in his
hands. Kevin could see Connor fumbling around nervously, not knowing what to do now that he’d
been caught, now that Kevin was here, watching him. Connor quietly cursed under his breath and
immediately started wiping at his eyes.

“Oh, God.” Connor moaned as he continued wiping away the tears. “I didn’t want you to see me
like this.”

“It’s okay.” Kevin said, cautiously.

“Any chance you’d believe me if I said I wasn’t crying? That it’s, um, allergies or something like
that?” The redhead tried to joke with a very weak smile, one that was so painfully forced, Kevin
could practically feel the strain of it himself.

“No.” Kevin smiled weakly as well, inching a bit closer to the table. “But don’t worry, I won’t tell
anyone.”

“Good.”

“Is that why you left us before? You were,” Kevin paused for a moment and tried his best to soften
his voice, “upset?”

Connor just shrugged, still wiping at his eyes, not really giving him a straight answer. Kevin could
hear him sniffle again.

“I didn’t know where you went.” Kevin continued, quietly. “Not that I really cared though. I mean,
Charlie was the one who wanted you there, not me.”

He didn’t mean for his words to sound so harsh, so cold, but he knew they kind of did. He could
only let his guard down so much, after all, with Connor McKinley.
Connor looked down to face his lap with a small nod. “She’s not mad at me, is she?” He asked sadly before hesitantly looking back up.

With that, Kevin gave Connor a real smile. He decided then to take a seat at the table, next to Connor. For what reason, he had no idea. He supposed that maybe, even after all these years, he still didn’t like seeing Connor looking so sad. And he most certainly didn’t like seeing him cry. He didn’t like it when he was nineteen years old and he didn’t like it now.

“Nah.” Kevin said, shaking his head as he reached over and grabbed a chip out of one of the bags sitting on the table. “Charlie doesn’t really get mad at people. Besides, she fell asleep right away anyway. It’s been a long day, even for her.”

“Well, that’s good.” Connor nodded. “I wouldn’t want to lose my status as her fun Uncle Connor.” He said, probably just to make Kevin smile. He did.

A brief silence came over them for a few moments. It was sort of uncomfortable, much like it always was, but somehow not quite as uncomfortable as it had been the previous day.

“You really are a great dad, you know.” Connor said, quietly, seemingly out of nowhere.

Kevin would have thought of the comment as being completely random had the other man not just watch him tuck his daughter into bed and read her a bedtime story.

“I mean, not that I didn’t think you would be.” Connor clarified, a nostalgic smile playing on his lips. Kevin could tell the other man’s eyes were welling back up a bit with unshed tears. “I always knew you would be. But, um, but watching you two together, tonight…well, you’re just,” he paused a moment, “you’re just so great with her, that’s all. She’s a very lucky girl, Kevin.”

“Thanks.” Kevin whispered, a bit surprised at the compliment. “That means a lot to me.”

“Well, it’s the truth.” Connor mustered out through what seemed to be a rather painful sigh. Kevin watched as Connor took a very long sip from his glass of wine before placing it back down on the table, shakily.

“It’s, um, it’s a lot harder than I thought it would be though.” Kevin said with a small smile, bringing his hands up to his mouth, in thought. “When you’re a kid, being a parent looks so easy.”

Connor nodded in understanding. He sat pensively for a few moments before speaking again.

“What happened?” Connor eventually asked, his voice gentle. “With Charlie’s mom, I mean. If you don’t mind me asking. I just couldn’t imagine any normal person wanting to abandon a sweet little girl like that.”

“Oh, um, it’s, uh—”, Kevin started before hesitating a moment. He swallowed the lump in his throat before going on. “It’s complicated.”

“I’ll bet.” Connor said, knowingly. He gazed at Kevin as he took in another slow sip of wine. “Don’t worry, you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

He didn't want to.

“What are you doing up so late?” Kevin asked, because he genuinely wanted to know.

“It’s complicated.” Connor repeated Kevin’s earlier words, his smile just a little bit cheeky.
Kevin rolled his eyes. He actually did want to know. He also wanted to know why Connor had been crying, but he didn’t want to press his luck either. Connor could sometimes be closed off and protective of himself, especially as he got older. He may not have wanted Kevin to know. And it wasn't as though Kevin wasn't the exact same way.

After a moment, Connor just shrugged. “I don’t know. I just couldn’t sleep, I guess.”

The redhead looked down at his lap again and Kevin thought he looked as though he was lying. Connor had never been a very good liar. He watched as the other man tilted his head back and drained the rest of his wine glass, noticing how his face got a little bit flushed after he swallowed.

“Did you even shower?” Kevin asked, his tone softer now, upon realizing that the other man hadn’t yet come in to use their shared bathroom. “I didn’t see you come in before.”

“Yeah, I snuck in and used Naba and Arnold’s shower.” Connor let out a sad chuckle. “You know Arnold, he can sleep through anything and Naba didn’t seem to mind.”

“Oh.” Kevin said, scowling. He shifted in place for a moment. “Well, you didn’t need to do that, Connor. You could’ve used our shower. That's what it's there for.”

“I know that, silly.” Connor said, softly. To Kevin’s surprise, he then reached over and rested a gentle hand atop Kevin’s lower arm, giving it a tender, reassuring squeeze.

Kevin felt himself flinch at the touch. Why did he always have to do that? Flinch, like that, whenever Connor touched him? Well, of course, Kevin did know why. He knew exactly why, but he should have been over that by now, shouldn’t he have been?

“Sorry.” Connor shook his head and retracted his hand. “I, uh, I better clean all this up and get to bed.” He groaned as he stood up. “Naba will have a fit. Look at this mess.”

Kevin looked around at all of the open cans, candy wrappers, opened bags of potato chips, amongst other snack foods. He silently took note of the nearly empty bottle of wine that had been full earlier, when Connor came in to attend story time. It was possible the other Elders had drank some of it, but Kevin had a hunch the bleary-eyed redhead in front of him had been the one to finish most of it off.

“I’ll help you.” Kevin offered, in a tone of finality, and immediately got to work cleaning up.

“No, no. I got it.” Connor said, accidentally stumbling back a bit, waving his hand. Connor may have been a little more tipsy than he realized.

“I really don’t mind.” Kevin said, carefully, as he started rallying up the empty cans and clipping the bags of chips shut. “I, uh, I actually get really bad insomnia. So, I doubt I’d be falling asleep any time soon anyway. It’s really no big deal.”

Kevin froze in place upon hearing the words leave his mouth. He wasn’t sure why he even opted to divulge this very personal information to Connor. It must have had something to do with this weird, quiet moment they were sharing, in this very late hour of the night—a strangely intimate moment after so many years of not sharing any intimate moments. Somehow, it seemed, that by some miracle or magic, neither of them were in the mood to be mean or snarky to one another. That would probably all change again tomorrow, the following day. But right now, in this moment, there was some kind of bizarre calmness that was making them act differently than before—something that made Kevin do strange things like tell Connor McKinley about his insomnia problem. What exactly that something was, Kevin had no idea.

“You have trouble sleeping?” Connor asked, a small smile tugging at his lips.
“Oh, um, yeah.” Kevin said, shrugging a bit. “I mean, sometimes. It comes and goes.”

“Me too. But I think tonight, it may have been the wine’s fault.” Connor said, gesturing to the nearly empty bottle. “Speaking of which, I should probably kill this bottle off, don’t you think? There’s only a little left anyway.”

Kevin thought Connor looked as though he’d already had too much to drink for one night, but he knew better than to tell Connor what to do. There was no telling Connor what to do. Not these days.

So Kevin didn’t tell him not to finish it and instead he just hummed to himself as the pair of tired ex-missionaries finished cleaning up the kitchen. Upon finishing off the wine, Connor chugged down a big glass of water as well, probably to help mitigate his hangover the next day. Well, at least he was thinking ahead.

“If you’re not too tired,” Kevin said, running a hand over the big pile of board games he’d brought with him, “I’d be up for one game of Scrabble, if you wanted to play. But just one. We have a big day tomorrow at the Water Park.”

Connor let out a laugh—a real, hearty, slightly drunken laugh—right into his glass of water, nearly making him choke. “Are you serious?” He finally managed to get out through the laughter.

“Yes?” Kevin asked, faltering a bit and suddenly unsure of himself. “I mean, only if you want to.” He paused for a moment, nearly having second thoughts about this whole thing. “Do you want to or not?”

Connor just laughed again, practically falling over into the sink to fill his water back up.

“Is that a yes?” Kevin was laughing now too, albeit still confused as to what was so funny.

Shaking his head, Kevin just turned around and pulled the Scrabble box out from beneath the pile, dusting it off a little with his hand. It was such an old game that had gone unused for far too long. It was the exact same one they had in the mission hut. The one they had been playing that fateful day, the day he and Connor had kissed for the very first time. That kiss, that game, that day, was what started everything. He shook his head, annoyed at himself for even thinking about it.

As Kevin turned back around to set up the board, he let out a quiet gasp, feeling a hot blush creep onto his cheeks, as his eyes landed on Connor—Connor, who was now leaning all the way over the sink, legs kicked back behind him, in those very short shorts. Connor had always had thick thighs and a round, soft bottom, which was accentuated a bit by those shorts that were just a little too short. Kevin knew Connor hadn’t meant to look like that, hadn’t meant to look so…sexy? Was sexy the right word? But he did, in that huge tee shirt and those teeny tiny shorts and his messy red hair and…

No. Kevin scolded himself, forcing himself to look away. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. Stop it. You’re disgusting. Just stop it. After a few moments of breathing with his eyes closed, he looked up and there were Connor’s eyes, gazing back at him.

Connor just giggled as he walked over to Kevin.

“How, we’ll play one game, but seriously, Kevin, I’m, like, legit half in the bag right now so you have a really good edge on me, okay?” Connor said, his cheeks all pink and rosy from the wine and the sunburn and probably from Kevin, too. “You have a good chance at beating me because, in full candidness,” he leaned down, close to Kevin’s ear, and lowered his voice to a whisper, “I’m pretty intoxicated right now.” And then Connor laughed again, a genuine, sort of self-deprecating laugh. And, for some reason, it made Kevin laugh too.
“Yet you still use words like ‘candidness’.” Kevin teased as he opened the box to set up the board. He still didn’t know why he was doing this. Why was he doing this?

“Hey, I’m still good, Kevin.” Connor gestured haughtily to himself as he stumbled back a little. He pulled out a chair and clumsily plopped down, across from Kevin. “Alright, this is like…Scrabble for losers right now. I’m pretty drunk right now and you’re not, so you have the thing…what’s that thing called in sports?” He asked, his voice slightly slurred. “The sports thing with the pro and the not the pro and the points…thing?”

“You might be a little drunker than I thought you were.” Kevin admitted, letting out a small, rather sad, laugh.

Why was he laughing? He usually hated drunkenness, but in that moment, all he felt was a weird warm feeling flooding through him, mixed with an overwhelming feeling of concern for the redhead sitting across from him. Why had Connor been crying? Why did he drink so much tonight? Why did he have to look so cute in those shorts? Kevin shook his head again, trying his hardest not to think about it.

“Come on, Kevin, you know...the thing, in sports, in the sports games.” Connor said, slurring his words just a bit. He gave Kevin a playful smack in the arm, as though that was going to somehow make him remember whatever word Connor was trying to think of. “Come on, you know. The thing. In sports?”

“Uhh…”

“Okay, never mind the sportsball thing.” Connor shook his head, frustrated. “Bottom line is, you should beat me because I’m not in a good state right now, okay?”

“Okay.” Kevin said, a slow smile inching its way across his face. “So if I don’t beat you, then that’s just...?”

“Sad.” Connor finished for him. “Like—really, really sad.”

“Got it.” Kevin said, rubbing his hands together. “Okay, you wanna go first?”

They played two games in a row, together. Kevin won the first game, as he should have, but not by much. Connor sobered up a little bit by the second game and took that win for himself, quite proudly too. It was now a little after three in the morning and neither of them could go on any more. Insomnia or drunk or whatnot, they had to get to bed.

Connor stood up with a loud yawn, stretching his arms out wide. “Uhhh, I’m so tired. Goodnight, Kevin.” He yawned again. “See you in the morning. Hopefully I’m not too badly hungover.”

Kevin watched Connor stumble a bit as he wandered over to his couch bed. He felt a pang of something stab him in the chest. It could have been sympathy or guilt or something else entirely, he wasn’t sure.

“Connor.” Kevin whispered, as it was pretty late. “Connor, come back here. You don’t need to sleep on the couch.”

“Hmm?” Connor said, turning around and scratching his head. Upon realizing what Kevin had just said, Connor waved his hand, making a weird drunken face. “No, no, that’s Charlie’s bed. That’s her big bed. I’m really okay out here.”

“She doesn’t even use it.” Kevin said, tilting his head to the side as he looked at Connor. “She’s been
Connor paused for a moment and Kevin could see in his eyes that he wasn’t sure what to do—wasn’t sure what he even wanted to do.

“I mean, I’m not saying you have to sleep in the extra bed or anything.” Kevin clarified nervously, suddenly very fidgety with his hands. “I just meant... you, um, you had a little too much to drink and it’s late and you’re tired. I just think you could use a real bed tonight, that’s all.”

Kevin watched Connor think about it for a few moments. Finally, he nodded and Kevin took his hand. It felt weird to take his hand and he tried not to jolt away or flinch or be weird. He helped Connor walk to the bedroom and when they got to the spare bed, Kevin sat him down, giving him a gentle push onto his back before tossing the covers over him.

“Goodnight, Connor.” Kevin whispered before climbing into his own bed, instinctively wrapping an arm snugly around his still-snoozing Charlie.

“A handicap.” Kevin heard Connor mumble, sleepily, after a few moments of silence. “It’s called a handicap.”

“What?” Kevin asked, confused. “You're overtired, Connor. Just close your eyes and go to sleep.”

“No, I mean, the sportsball thing, the stupid word I couldn't remember.” Connor murmured and Kevin could hear him giggling just a little. “It's called a handicap.”

Kevin just smiled to himself. “Goodnight, Con.” He paused for a moment. “Sweet dreams.” He added, softly, not really knowing why. Maybe because that was how he always used to wish Connor a good night, a long time ago.

Connor fell asleep almost instantly, all the wine he drank earlier having nearly made him pass out a while ago, but the redhead seemed to have been resisting it, for whatever reason. Perhaps because Kevin was there and Connor maybe wanted to talk to Kevin. He didn’t know the reason. That was just a guess.

Kevin didn’t fall asleep for quite a long time.

Instead, he just laid there, wide awake, thinking, watching Connor sleep—watching as his nose let out tiny little snores every so often and his messy hair was splayed against the pillow and he was curled up into a weird little ball, much like he always used to be when they once shared a bed together. Connor had always been a side sleeper.

Kevin watched him sleep until, finally, his eyes betrayed him and eventually closed themselves.

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One day, not long after Kevin had been given a new dorm assignment and roommate, he received a knock at the door. Upon opening it, Kevin found a middle-aged man, dressed in a suit, holding a binder in his hands.

“Hi there, young man, I’m looking for a student named Kevin. Kevin Price. I was told he lives here.” The man greeted warmly, his smile wide and eyes brown and inviting. “If I have the wrong dorm, you have my sincerest apologies.”

Kevin wasn’t sure who this man was or what he wanted, but his curiosity got the better of him.
“I’m Kevin. Kevin Price.” He said, hesitantly. “And you are?”

Kevin was always hesitant when answering the door these days. He was sick and tired of all these university groups coming around, trying to “save his soul” and offering him their fake bullshit “peer counseling services”. Sure, he was growing weary of the ill-treatment he was constantly receiving here at school, from teachers and students alike, but he wasn’t about to just give up on Connor. He wasn’t about to give up on Connor and his dream of living an honest life as a gay ex-Mormon. He still had some fight left inside him. And he just needed to make it through this year. You just have to make it through this year.

“Ah, hello, Kevin.” The man said kindly, reaching out a hand for Kevin to shake. He did, albeit cautiously. “It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

“Finally meet me?” Kevin asked, confused. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Dr. Nathan.” The man said, warmly. “I used to be a counselor over at North Star. May I come in for a quick chat?”

Kevin rolled his eyes and moved to shut the door. He’d never heard of North Star, but he did know exactly where this conversation was going and he wanted absolutely nothing to do with it.

“No thanks, I’m not interested.” Kevin said, curtly, but as he went to close the door, the man put a hand up and stopped it from closing.

“Your parents sent me, Kevin.” The man said, making Kevin freeze. His parents? “Listen to me, son. They just thought I might be able to help you, that’s all. Help you back on the right path.” The man said, his voice still gentle. “Please just let me in for a few minutes, okay? I promise it won’t take long at all.”

“I have no interest in whatever crap you’re spewing.” Kevin spat, regaining some of his sensibilities. His body finally unfroze, so he moved to close the door again, but the man was stronger than Kevin and continued to hold it open.

“I’m not associated with the school. I’m not from the Honor Code office.” The man said, softly. “Your parents told me you’ve been having some problems fitting in here at school and I just thought we could talk for a minute.”

The door still wasn’t budging and Kevin was growing tired.

“Fine.” Kevin sighed.

He was too tired to fight today. He figured he’d listen to the man’s spiel and then never talk to him again. If anything, it would be a waste of ten minutes. Ten minutes didn’t matter.

“You’ve made the right choice.” The man said as he made his way inside.

“Whatever.” Kevin said, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. “Just...make it quick, alright? I have class in a half hour. I’ve already missed too many classes this semester. I can’t afford another miss or they’ll lower my grade.”

The man opted to take a seat at Kevin’s desk, across from the bed, where Kevin was now seated.

“Thanks, Kevin. I promise not to take up too much of your time.” The man nodded with a small smile. “Your parents came to me, distraught, the other day. They said that while you were on your mission, in Uganda, you took to having, um—“ he paused for a moment before lowering his voice,
“homosexual relations with your District Leader. Sexual relations that go against God’s teachings, that go against what we all believe in here, at this university. Teachings that I know you still believe in, deep down.”

He took a moment to let Kevin answer. He didn’t.

“Is that correct, son?” The man prodded, gently. “It’s okay, Kevin. Nobody is judging you here. This is a safe place. You can tell me anything. Is what I said correct? Did you have homosexual relations with your District Leader while you were on your mission?”

“No,” Kevin spat, angrily. “Not in the way you’re making it sound, anyway. We’re in a real relationship. We’re in love. I don’t know what my parents told you about us, but the way you’re making it sound…that isn’t how it was—I mean is. And frankly it’s none of your business, so just get out of—”

“Alright, calm down—”

“No.” Kevin shook his head. “No. I have no interest in changing that, so if that’s what you’re after, feel free to just leave now, okay?”

“Of course you don’t want to change it now.” The man said, calmly. “You’re getting what you want from him, getting what you need. It feels good. Of course you don’t want to change anything. I can understand that.” The man said, making Kevin feel a bit confused. The man didn’t seem angry or intimidating, not like the counselors at the Honor Code office. “But you’re forgetting one thing, son.”

“And what’s that?” Kevin snapped.

“Your soul, for one.” The man said, softly, leaning in and gently touching Kevin’s chest, where his heart was. Upon pulling back, he continued, looking deep into Kevin’s eyes. “Now I know you’ve strayed away from your faith before. Your parents told me all about what happened on your mission and how that experience may have changed your views on the Church—”

“That’s an understatement.” Kevin snorted, cutting him off. He didn’t like the way the man was so intently gazing at him so he turned to look down at his shoes instead. It felt as though the man could see past his skin and into his soul. It was creepy.

“But you know as well as I do that there’s a reason God wants us to be with women. I know you’ve read the Book of Mormon, Kevin. Your mother told me all about you, you know. About how you were the best student at your Church, always having to explain the scriptures to the other students.” He paused for a moment. “God wants us to be with women so that we can bear children and live long, happy lives knowing our soul will be cared for in the next life.”

“You keep forgetting that I don’t believe that crap anymore.” Kevin said, standing up. “Can you just leave now please? I’m going to be late for class as it is and I can’t miss any more. I can’t—”

“Kevin, are you forgetting how happy you used to be?” The man continued on. “How happy and fulfilled and blessed Kevin Price used to be before all of this? Before your mission? Before that boy came into your life?”

That caught Kevin off guard.

“What?” Kevin asked, shaking his head. “What do you mean?”

“Are you forgetting how blessed and wonderful your life was,” the man clarified, “back when you had faith in the Church? In Heavenly Father? Back when you believed in the Church’s teachings and
in God? Are you forgetting all that?”

Kevin fidgeted for a moment. “That wasn’t real happiness.” He told himself, aloud. “I just liked being praised for doing everything right, that’s all it was. I liked being the best.” He hesitated for a moment. “That wasn’t real happiness.” He repeated, mostly to himself, to remind himself of the truth. He swallowed hard, reminding himself to breathe in. “I happen to like who I am now.”

“You were praised because you were the best, Kevin.” The man said, nostalgically, as though he had been there first hand, to see Kevin at his finest, even though Kevin knew very well that he hadn’t been.

Kevin watched Dr. Nathan open his binder and look down at the paper in front of him.

The man continued. “I mean, just look at this resume, Kevin. Straight-A student all of his life. Valedictorian of Heritage High School, class of 2010. Voted Most Likely to Succeed in your high school yearbook. Leader of the Salt Lake City Youth Bible Study group three years in a row. Excelled with high honors at the Missionary Training Center.” The man closed the binder and stepped closer to Kevin. “You were praised for a reason, Kevin. Heavenly Father and your parents were so proud of you, son. But then you encountered a little hardship, with those Africans, and so you let your faith slip a little. It happens. It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Kevin.”

Kevin faltered a bit upon hearing the list of his former exaltations. Sure, he used to enjoy the praise. He used to enjoy being revered by everyone. But he just wasn’t that person anymore. He didn’t want to be that person, didn’t want to be Elder Price anymore. He liked who he was now. Well, most of the time, anyway. He was a little bit bruised and had gotten tumbled around a bit, but he truly felt as though he’d come out on the other side of this whole journey, happier and stronger than before. Well, at least, he was happy when he was in Uganda with Connor. Now…

“I’m not that person anymore.” Kevin said, sourly, gesturing towards the door. “And my experience in Africa was a Hell of a lot more than a ‘little hardship’. You have no idea what I went through.”

“Well, we can talk about it.” The man nodded. “At my office.”

“No, thanks.” Kevin shook his head. “You can thank my parents for sending you, but I really don’t need any help. I’m doing just fine as it is. I’ll get through this and then next year I’ll transfer to NYU and I’ll be with Connor and everything will be alright again.” He said, divulging a bit more information than he’d intended. “Now please just leave, now, before I call the campus police and have you escorted out.”

“Oh, Kevin.” The man sighed as he stood up. “I didn’t want it to come to this, but I suppose that boy has damaged you far worse than I suspected.”

“Damaged me?” Kevin asked, enraged at the notion that this idiocy was somehow Connor’s fault. “You think he damaged me? He loves me. Now get out of here right now or I swear I’ll—”

“Your parents are going to cut you off, Kevin.” He man stated, simply.

“What?” Kevin froze. “What did you just say?”

“They’re going to cut you off, unless you agree to see me twice a week for counselling.” The man repeated. “I’m sorry to have to tell you outright like this. I thought you might agree to do this on your own, but I was sadly mistaken.”

“What do you mean ‘cut me off’?” Kevin fumbled a moment, trying to digest this news. “What is that even supposed to mean?”
“It means no more money being deposited into your bank account, no more paying for your very expensive education, your food, your clothing and—“, the man paused for a moment, “they might even consider not allowing you to return home this summer, if you keep this lifestyle up.”

“Are you serious?” Kevin just laughed, darkly. “Wow.”

“Wow?”

“I mean, I knew my parents were crazy, but this? Wow. Just wow.” He could feel tears beginning to well up behind his eyes. He didn’t understand how his parents could do this to him. How could they do this to him?

“This is taking it to a whole new level.” Kevin continued on. He could feel the hot tears rolling down his cheeks. “I really underestimated their propensity for bullshit.”

The man furrowed his brow, clearly not liking how Kevin seemed to be taking this.

“Yes, I am quite serious, young man.” He stepped toward Kevin, carefully. “Now look, I’m not affiliated with the university. I was sent here by your parents, privately, to try and make you well again. They are paying me to perform a service and a service I intend to provide. If you agree to the terms, we’ll start tomorrow. If you don’t, well,” the man sighed, “well, then that’s your choice, isn’t it? You’re over eighteen. You can make your own choices. But I don’t recommend saying no, Kevin. It’s a tough world out there. It’s a tough, expensive, unkind world. And for a young boy of only twenty-one years of age who has no job, no money, no support—well, the world will be especially unkind to you, I can promise you that.”

“This sounds an awful lot like blackmail.” Kevin whispered, blinking back tears. “As if my life weren’t already shitty enough—“

“Language, Mr. Price.” The man said, dry and unamused. “We’re in a religious institution.”

“Please just get out!” Kevin spat. He could feel the tears running down his face now, fast, hot, and angry. “Just get out of here. I never want to see you again.”

“So you’ve made your choice then, have you?” The man asked. “Is this your choice?”

Kevin hesitated for a long time. Of course he didn’t want to attend whatever cockamamie religious “therapy” the man was peddling at his parent’s prodding (and dollar), but the prospect of being on his own with no support whatsoever was equally as terrifying, if not more so.

“Fine.” Kevin whispered, eventually, after a long while of thinking and reeling and silence. He could feel the hot tears still rolling down his cheeks. “You win, alright? They win. But don’t think this changes anything because it doesn’t. I’m not going to change. Not for you, not for them, not for anyone, you hear me?”

“This isn’t about winning, son.” The man said, kindly now, placing a hand on his shoulder. “It’s about healing. It’s about God. It’s about your soul. It’s about the difference between right and wrong.”

“No.” Kevin shook his head, disgusted at this man. “It’s about manipulation and blackmail and brainwashing, but that’s just fine. You can keep on telling yourself that if it makes you able to sleep at night. I don’t care.”

The man just sighed. “Alright, let’s make a deal then.”
Kevin just stared at the “doctor” with questioning, judgmental eyes. He was sure now that he absolutely despised this man. But he was also tired. So tired. He was tired of fighting, tired of always fighting. He was tired of everyone telling him he was going to burn in Hell. He was just tired of it all.

He’d lost ten pounds of weight in the past couple of weeks because he was too tired to even eat. Even doing simple things were becoming increasingly difficult. He felt sad all the time, except when he talked to Connor or he was sleeping. He loved listening to the sound of Connor’s voice—his sweet, happy voice. And he loved sleeping. At least while he was sleeping, no one could hurt him or bother him or torment him. Well, unless he had a Hell dream but a couple of sleeping pills each night had pretty much cured him of those. As long as he didn’t wake up, he wouldn’t remember his dreams. And that was good enough for him.

Dr. Nathan continued on. “You’ll come to therapy, at my office, and if, by the end, you still see no noticeable change in your desires or attraction to that boy…that boy you’re with, what’s his name again?”

“Connor.” Kevin whispered, the name sounding bizarre on his tongue when talking about him in this way, in this disparaging way to this strange, horrible, manipulative man.

“Connor. Alright. If you find that, by the end of our sessions, you still find yourself wanting to be with Connor, in that way, then I’ll explain to your parents that we tried, that we really tried, but there was simply nothing we could do to change your feelings. I will ask them to go leniently on you.” The man said, quietly. “Do we have a deal, young man?”

“Well, you’re in for a gigantic waste of time then. My feelings for Connor won’t change. I know they won’t.” Kevin shook his head. “I love him. I love him so much and there’s nothing you or anyone else could ever do to change that. Not now, not ever, you hear me? Because I’m happy. He makes me happy. And I care about him and I love him and we’re going to go to NYU next year, together, and we’ll get through all of this bullshit and—”

“Do we have a deal?” The man asked again, more forcefully. “I haven’t got all day, son.”

Kevin cursed under his breath and gave the door a hard kick.

“Fine.” He eventually mustered out. “You win. Happy now?” He said, rather sadly, because it felt as though he was giving up, even though he knew he wasn’t giving up. He wasn’t giving up. He wouldn’t give up.

But, still, the words hurt him, to say fine to this lunacy, to this ignorance. It hurt more deeply than he’d ever expected it to hurt. It hurt to agree to something that was designed to deter him from loving the one person he loved more than anyone else in the entire world.

It hurt.

And it hurt to talk about Connor in that way, in the way he was being forced to talk about him—as though he was some kind of problem that had to be solved. And Kevin felt a horrible guilty feeling well up inside of him the moment the word fine rolled off his tongue, as though going along with this stupid thing, despite knowing it was all just for show and it would never actually make him change, was somehow betraying Connor. As though he were betraying all of the plans they’d made, all of their dreams, together, just by agreeing to see this disgusting man for his dubious “counselling” services.

Kevin knew his feelings for Connor wouldn’t—couldn’t—ever change. But then why did he feel so incredibly guilty?
Deep down, he supposed, he must have been very weak, so weak, to allow all of these people to hurt him like this. He was weak and spineless and didn’t have the courage to fight for himself the way Connor did. Once Connor had allowed himself to open up and turn his true self on, he never looked back again. The thought had never even crossed his mind. Kevin knew it was because that feeling of freedom, of finally liberating himself from a lifetime of repression, felt so damn good that it made him angry—it made Connor angry that he ever had to suppress it in the first place. He was angry at the world for making him hate himself for so many years. Now that Connor was out and proud and happy—well, he’d never go back to the way things were ever again.

No, Connor was off in New York City, off in the land of gay pride parades and gay clubs and gay everything—Kevin knew his boyfriend was having a ball with the whole experience at college, at NYU. And he was happy for Connor, he honestly was. But there was also a part of him that was growing increasingly jealous and unhappy and sad. Connor’s life just kept getting better and better the more true to himself he became while Kevin’s was getting worse and worse and worse.

A part of Kevin knew it was his own damn fault for not going to NYU, for getting sucked into this manipulation game of his parents. And for that, he blamed himself.

“Good.” The man smiled as he handed Kevin his business card. “Meet me at my office at seven o’clock tomorrow night. The address is on this card.”

Kevin nodded sullenly.

He felt depleted of energy, as though standing up to this man, albeit failing at standing up to him, had completely drained him of whatever amount of energy he had left.

He skipped class that day.

He didn’t eat.

He’d lost. At least, that was how it felt, anyway—as though he’d just...lost.

He thought about calling Connor and telling him about the horrible man and his horrible words and the horrible things he was going to have to do just to keep from being out on the street.

But he didn’t. Instead, he just popped two sleeping pills and went to sleep.

He wouldn’t need to think about it any more that night.
Connor could hear the soft murmurings of two voices talking not too far away from him as he began to wake up. The first thing he felt was a dull, throbbing pain pounding in his head. He tried opening his eyes, but the little bit of light shining in through the window seemed just as blinding as a supernova.

Great. He thought to himself in a whine. You’re hungover.

He used all the energy he had just to cover his face up with the blankets and bury his body further into the bed. It took him a few moments to remember where he was. He was in Disney World on their reunion trip. Kevin let him take the spare bed last night on account of his drunkenness, if he remembered correctly.

He overheard a soft snicker, a male voice, and then suddenly the sound of a little girl’s high-pitched giggle.

Charlie. He thought to himself with some semblance of a smile. It was a little hard to muster up a smile at the moment due to his pounding headache and throbbing limbs, but there was just something about the little girl’s laugh that was infectious, making it nearly impossible not to smile.

“Go get him.” He overheard the man, probably Kevin, whisper. Another high-pitched giggle and then suddenly—

“Oof!” Connor yelped as soon as he felt a body hurdle itself onto his stomach.

“Uncle Connor!” He heard Charlie cry out, way too happily for the pitiful state he was currently in. “Uncle Connor! Wake up, wake up, it’s time to go to the water park!”

Connor groaned and gently rolled over so the little girl could slide off of him. From his place of sanctity underneath the covers, he could hear Kevin’s laughter filling up the room. Even in his exhausted, pained state, Connor still couldn’t help the tiny smile that appeared on his face at the sound. He’d always loved Kevin’s laugh—his real, honest laugh.
“Daddy!” Charlie cried and hopped off the bed, much to Connor’s relief. “Daddy, he’s not waking up! He’s not waking up!”

“Well, don't be a quitter. Try again.” He heard Kevin whisper and Connor instinctively narrowed his eyes even though he knew Kevin couldn’t see his face under the covers.

With that, Connor (painfully) lifted up his arm and shoved the covers off of him, revealing his probably-worn-out, probably-gross, probably-annoyed post-drinking face.

“I’m up.” He croaked out, rather hoarsely. “I’m up…”

“Morning, sunshine.” Kevin sang cheerfully, a gigantic smirk on his face. He was sitting on the other bed, across from Connor, a cup of black coffee in his hands.

“Yay!” the little girl cried out and leapt back onto Connor’s belly, making another pained noise escape his mouth. “Uncle Connor! Daddy told me you can’t wait to go on all the water slides with me today. Even the really scary ones!”

“Oh Daddy did, did he?” Connor grumbled, rolling over onto his other side so he could properly glare at Kevin—Kevin with that giant smirk on his face.

“He did!” She cried.

“Yeah, well,” Connor hummed, sleepily, “Daddy’s evil.”

Charlie’s eyes widened and she turned back to Kevin. Upon seeing her dad laugh and shake his head, she allowed herself a small smile.

“You smell funny.” Charlie said to Connor with a big smile on her face, making Kevin laugh even harder into his cup of coffee.

“I know, honey.” Connor said. “I know.”

“Hey, sweetie.” Kevin said to the little girl. “Why don't you go help Naba make the lunches and get your bag all packed, okay?”

Charlie nodded but before abandoning her perch atop Connor’s stomach, she leaned in and gave him a small kiss on the cheek, making him smile a big dopey smile. Charlie sure was a charmer, just like her dad, Connor thought to himself.

“I'll help Aunt Naba make your lunch for the water park.” Charlie said sweetly, to Connor. “What do you want?”

“Painkillers and a time machine would be nice, but I'll settle for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.” Connor said, giving the girls bouncy brown curls a ruffle. The little girl nodded and hopped off the bed to go help Naba.

“Coffee?” Kevin asked Connor gingerly once Charlie had ran out of the room, setting a steaming cup of coffee with cream and sugar down on the nightstand.


“Every day.” Kevin replied before taking a long sip. “Why?”

“I thought you were like,” Connor yawned mid-sentence and let out a tiny whine, “mister super Mormon again or something.”
“Yeah, well, the no coffee rule is pretty stupid.” Kevin said, taking in another big sip of the black liquid.

“A lot of the rules are pretty stupid.” Connor mumbled, mustering up enough energy to at least roll his eyes. He winced a little and held his hand over his forehead in agony. “I happen to think the no gay rule is pretty damn stupid too.”

Kevin flushed a little at that and turned back to his coffee. “Well, I’d never want to wake up without my morning coffee, that’s for sure. It’s the one thing I look forward to about getting up in the morning.”

“That’s a little dark, isn’t it?” Connor said, raising an eyebrow. “Even for you.”

Kevin just shrugged and took another sip of coffee.

As Connor sat up, he felt his head spin and stomach churn, souring on the spot. He felt around his mouth with his tongue. It was dry and parched.

“I feel so sick.” Connor whined, looking longingly at the cup of coffee Kevin had fixed for him that he desperately wanted to drink, but his tummy just didn’t feel well enough yet.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have drank, like, all the wine.” Kevin smirked, biting rather teasingly into a muffin. He gazed at Connor as he took another long sip of his coffee.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t of….” Connor sputtered off for a moment before giving up and flopping back down on the bed. “Mmm, never mind, I’m too tired to yell at you right now.”

Kevin chuckled at Connor as he stood up and opened the mini fridge, pulling out a bottle of cold water. He grabbed a bottle of Advil from the dresser before walking back over to Connor.

“Here. These should make you feel a little better.” Kevin smirked as he tossed the items on top of Connor. “Better enough to go on all those water slides, anyway.” He added cheekily.

Connor narrowed his eyes at Kevin—Kevin, who was grinning that big, stupid grin of his. He knew his ex-boyfriend was getting entirely too much pleasure out of this.

“You’re evil.”

“I know.”

And Connor smiled again, anyway, despite the pounding headache and the bad taste in his mouth and that dull, nagging feeling of maybe having to vomit.

_Damn Kevin._

***

Kevin had gone to three “therapy” sessions so far with Dr. Nathan and it seemed as though each time he went, things just got weirder and weirder each time.

The first session was fairly mild, with Dr. Nathan asking for a rundown of his romantic history. There wasn’t much to tell in that department since Kevin shyly admitted that he’d only ever really had a crush on one person—and that person was Connor. Using this new information and twisting it around to suit his own agenda, Dr. Nathan began insisting that same sex attraction can sometimes be learned or forced and that Connor may have taken advantage of the fact that Kevin was so
inexperienced in that area and influenced him to engage in homosexual activity against his will.

Kevin fought him on it, of course. Vehemently fought him on it. They fought for about an hour until the session was over, Kevin feeling a bit haughty at his apparent victory as he stepped out of the office.

During the second session, the man kicked it up a notch by making him watch some kind of anti-gay Mormon propaganda video that looked like it was made in the 1980s. It did nothing to sway his mind, of course, but he was starting to think that agreeing to this ridiculousness was probably not a very good idea. He called his parents that night to confront them on this supposed “therapy” they were putting him through and all they did was continue to laud him for “making the right choice”. The fact that his parents were complimenting him for once felt kind of nice, but it was for all the wrong reasons. All of it just felt very, very wrong.

During the third session, Dr. Nathan asked Kevin a series of invasive questions about the types of sex acts he’d engaged in with his boyfriend and demanded they discuss his sex life and desires in detail. The entire exchange made Kevin blush beet red and squirm uncomfortably in his seat. He didn’t even like talking about those kinds of things with Connor, let alone this strange man. But he answered the questions honestly anyway, despite the feeling of wanting to crawl into a hole in shame.

He still hadn’t mentioned any of this insanity to Connor yet, but he was starting to wonder if maybe he should. He just figured these distressing events were only temporary anyway. They wouldn’t really matter in the long run, so why should he tell Connor now, just to worry him needlessly? Connor had a tendency to be a bit of a worrywart, especially when it came to his Kevin, and his Kevin just didn’t want to give him reason to stress over this. He had all of this mess under control. He didn’t need what would surely be a ton of questions and ardent protests and worries from Connor.

It did feel weird though, he admitted to himself, to keep all of this a secret from his boyfriend—the only person in the world with whom he really confided in these days. Well, besides Arnold. He still had Arnold in his life, thank God. Keeping this a secret from both Connor and Arnold was starting to take its toll on him. The constant secrecy made him feel as though he were living some kind of double life or something, like Clark Kent, only not nearly as awesome. It was also becoming increasingly difficult to talk to Connor about normal things that used to be effortless—like how his day went (it was pretty much always bad) or his friends (he didn’t have many of those) or how his classes were going (he was passing them, but barely).

Kevin knew Connor had started to notice the lack of communication and had been growing more and more insecure because of it. His boyfriend was starting to ask him things like “are you okay?” and “what’s wrong?” a lot more often than he did before. Sometimes they’d have these long, strained silences during their nightly calls, but Kevin would always assure him that everything was fine—that he loved him and that they were fine. Kevin’s assurances would usually make Connor feel a bit better and they’d be okay for a little while.

_You just have to get through this year._ Kevin told himself as he begrudgingly pulled up his pants to get ready for his usual Thursday night session with the “doctor”. _It won’t be so bad. You’ll get through this, you’ll pass your classes, you’ll apply to NYU for next Fall. It’ll all be okay._

He ran a comb through his hair and fluffed it up a little, trying to at least look a little more like his old self. Nodding firmly to himself in the mirror, he ran out of the room and headed for what would be his fourth session.
They were only two days in and already Connor had to restock on sunscreen. They were all at the water park together that day and had miraculously found several empty lounge chairs surrounding the large pool area in the center of the park. Connor planned to park his hungover ass in a lounge chair and sip on iced coffee for most of the day. Well, at least until Charlie inevitably would make him go on rides anyway. The kids and some adults in their group had all scattered, eagerly jumping in the pool and going on water rides. Connor was already covered from head to toe in sunscreen and was laying on one of the lounge chairs next to Chris. His body was mostly covered by a towel, his pale skin protected underneath the sanctity of their umbrella.

“I feel like literal death.” Connor said aloud, probably to Chris, who was sitting next to him, equally covered in sunscreen.

“What the heck happened last night?” Chris asked, his voice a bit concerned. “You seemed fine when we left you.”

Connor just groaned.

“Is it because you’re worried about your mom?” Chris asked, his tone soft. “I know you were nervous about leaving her for this long.”

Connor had been taking care of his ailing mother back in Salt Lake City for the past two months. He was able to keep the lease on his apartment in New York City, thanks to the rampantness of illegal subletting, but the past few months had not been very pleasant for Connor.

“No.” Connor shook his head. “I mean, of course I’m worried about my mom, but that’s not why I was upset.”

“Kevin?” Chris asked, knowingly.

“Kevin.” He sighed. It was always Kevin.

“What did he do this time?”

“Nothing.” Connor shook his head with a sad smile. “He didn’t do anything wrong at all.”

“Then why were you so upset last night?” Chris asked as he sprayed a little more sunscreen on Connor’s knees for him. They looked like they were starting to burn. “He must’ve done something stupid.”

“Only if being a really amazing father is something stupid.” Connor said softly and sent Chris a glance that would tell him everything he was feeling without having to say a single word.

Chris arched his eyebrows. “Oh, so it was that kind of upset.”

“Yup.”

“Connor,” Chris said with a sigh, “you need to stop holding onto something that literally has nothing left to hold on to. Kevin’s gone. Gone. Finito. Into the wind. No more.” He advised, placing a soft palm to Connor’s shoulder. “I know it’s hard, but one of these days you’re just going to have to let go—let him go.”

“I know.” Connor whispered. The words rolling off Chris’s tongue were from a place of concern, he
knew, but still, they ripped him apart inside, nonetheless. "And I’m trying, I swear. It’s just—"
Connor sighed and readjusted himself so he was leaning in closer to Chris. “Every once in a while,
he does these things that make me think he might...still have feelings for me. I don’t know for sure,
it’s just a feeling I get sometimes.”

“Hmph.” Was all Chris said, pursing his lips.

Connor could tell his friend did not like where this conversation was going. Chris had made it crystal
clear years ago that he thought Connor was better off without Kevin. It made sense, though, that
Chris would hold a grudge against Kevin. After all, the man broke his best friend’s heart. That
rightfully made Chris pretty pissed and he’d never quite forgiven Kevin for it.

“I already told you about the hand on my leg during the flume ride.” Connor went on despite Chris’s
obvious objections. “Then he practically had a stroke when I was flirting with Sven. I mean, did
you see that? He was crazy jealous. And then, last night, he…”, the redhead paused a moment, “he,
um, he sort of...took care of me, I guess? I don’t know. He found me all upset in the kitchen which
was beyond embarrassing and then we kind of just...talked. We haven’t done that in a long time.
Years.” He bit his lip and prodded to Chris. “Do you think it means anything?”

“You didn’t tell him why you were crying, right?” Chris asked sourly, his eyebrows creased.

“No, no.” Connor shook his head adamantly. “Of course not.”

“Good.”

“Anyway, he helped me clean up the kitchen and then we, um...”. He paused a moment and found
himself smiling again. “We played a board game together. I was pretty wine drunk by then but it was
still really sweet.”

“What’d you play?”

“Scrabble.” Connor said, guiltily. He knew that Chris would know the subtext buried
underneath that.

“You didn’t.”

“We did.” Connor admitted, biting down on his bottom lip.

“Connor…”

“I know.” Connor said, quietly. “And then he felt bad about me being all drunk and sleeping on the
couch so he let me—he let me have the spare bed. With him—in the room with him.”

“Jesus Christ.” Chris sighed and flopped back down on his lounge chair.

“Look, I know it probably means nothing, okay?” Connor said, firmly, giving himself a stern nod.
“I’m not letting myself get sucked back into this. I’m not.”

“Connor,” Chris said, placing a comforting hand onto the other man’s shoulder, “you can do
whatever you want, okay? I just don’t want to see you get hurt again, that’s all. He always does this,
Connor. He gets your hopes up and then he just lets you down again.”

“But don’t you think there must be a reason?” Connor asked, softly. “I feel like there has to be
something he’s not telling me. Scratch that, I know there’s something he’s not telling me.”
“Connor, you broke up over six years ago.” Chris said, gently. “If he hasn’t told you by now, there probably isn’t anything to tell.”

“But it came out of nowhere, Chris.” Connor pressed, referring to their break up. “He just started acting different one day, for no reason. He stopped acting like Kevin, like my Kevin. All of a sudden, he was acting distant and weird and quiet and then one day, he just...” Connor abruptly stopped upon feeling a breath catch in his throat.

Just thinking about it, about that day, about the day Kevin had ended it—well, it broke Connor’s heart a little. Saying it out loud like that broke it even more. He looked down to face his lap, biting his lip.

“I think you’re looking for something that isn’t there anymore.” Chris stated, honestly. “You should just pick yourself up, dust yourself off and move on with your life. Find someone who appreciates you—someone who really appreciates you—and isn’t afraid of their own sexuality. That’s what I think you should do.”

Connor smiled weakly. He knew Chris just cared about him. That was all it was—a best friend’s concern. Chris had been the one to help him through it all after Kevin had broken up with him years ago. It was devastating for Chris to have to watch Connor’s heart get stomped on like that. Still, Chris just didn’t know Kevin the way Connor did. And Connor had a feeling there was a missing link to this whole thing—more to the story than Kevin ever let on. Once thing was for sure, if he ever had any chance of finding out, now was the time—when they were literally stuck together for the next eight days.

Shaking his head, Connor tried not to think about it. Instead, he popped another couple of Advil and took a long drink of iced coffee. He was finally starting to feel somewhat human again.

*Thank God for coffee.*

***

“Right on time.” Dr. Nathan said, smiling. “Come on in, Kevin. We have a busy session ahead of us tonight.” He said with a smile, gesturing him to sit down. “Now before we get into this, I just want to reiterate that this is all for the greater purpose of you reintegrating into society as a righteous, straight, Mormon man, nothing else. Understood?”

“I don’t want to reintegrate into a society as a righteous, straight, Mormon man.” Kevin snorted. “I’m only doing this so my parents don’t completely disown me, okay? I told you already, I have no interest in changing. But go ahead, bring it, what’s on the menu for tonight? More Mormon propaganda videos from 1985? Or are we going to go over how I like my boyfriend to touch my dick again? Because that was really fun.”

“There’s no need to be crass, young man.”

“Me being crass?” Kevin asked with a dark laugh. “You’re the one who kept asking me those disgusting questions about my sex life that’s barely even a sex life.”

“It was in preparation for tonight.” The man said before getting up and locking the door with a key, jiggling it a couple times to make sure it was indeed locked.

Kevin could see the video screen was up again. He wondered what he’d be forced to watch this time. He honestly didn’t even want to know.
To say he was shocked and appalled when Dr. Nathan put on a pornography video of a man and a woman having sex would have been an understatement. His eyes practically bulged out of his head as he jolted upright with a gasp.

“What the fuck!” Was all Kevin could think to shout. “What—what the fuck?” He screamed.

“Shhhh. Calm down, son. Just sit back down in the chair.” Dr. Nathan said softly and pushed Kevin back down into the chair. “You’re going to watch this for about twenty minutes before we switch it, okay? Can you do that for me?”

“Pornography is against the rules.” Kevin managed to stutter, horrified that this supposedly religious man would seriously want to sit there and watch Kevin as he watched a porno. “Mormons don’t watch porn. And Mormons definitely don’t watch other Mormons watch porn.”

“It’s all just part of the therapy.” The man said. “For our purposes, it doesn’t break the rules.”

The next twenty minutes were spent in complete silence other than the moaning and thrusting and screams coming from the HD TV screen. Kevin had begun to perspire through his shirt—not from arousal or anything, but just from sheer panic. This was just too weird. He just wanted it to stop. All he wanted was for it to stop.

“How do you feel?” Dr. Nathan asked softly as he approached Kevin, the first twenty minutes having elapsed. “Do you feel any stirring down there? Are you turned on at all?”

Kevin just shook his head. Even if that video had the ability to turn him on, how could it possibly do so in this circumstance, while he was bound to a chair on display with a crazy man staring at him as a porno played in the background?

Dr. Nathan got up and selected another video from the DVD menu. This time, it was of two men having sex together, missionary style. For Kevin, it was all pretty much the same and just as appalling as the straight video. Being forced to watch any kind of sex video in front of another person was unthinkable, for Kevin.

“I think this one’s more your speed, don’t you think?” The man said, coolly, with a bit of condescension to his tone.

“Why would you be showing me gay porn?” Kevin shook his head, flabbergasted. “I don’t—I don’t understand.”

“Just relax and let your body do what it wants to do.” Dr. Nathan said, his voice gentle. “It’s important for you to get turned on by this in order for the treatment to work. Relax your muscles.”

He took hold of Kevin’s shoulders and began kneading them. “Relax.”

Kevin didn’t really know what else to say. He was entirely and utterly dumbfounded by the situation he’d found himself in. He didn’t really care about about it “working” or not because he wasn’t here to get cured in the first place, nor did he believe it was even possible. But something made him listen to the man and he tried to focus on the actual scene in front of him on the screen. The men were kind of attractive, he supposed, but he didn’t really feel anything down there, maybe just a slight stirring. The only man he ever really thought about in that way was Connor, but that was because they had
an emotional connection. Kevin loved Connor’s body too, but without some kind of connection, it was hard for Kevin to really get turned on.

A few minutes later, Kevin felt his head being whipped back and a dark, foul-tasting syrup was suddenly being poured down his throat. Not knowing what was happening, he aimlessly struggled against the man’s grip, whimpering for him to stop. But it was too late, the man had already been able to pour whatever that stuff was down his throat. Once the man let him go, Kevin shot up and moved to punch him, but the man deflected it.

“Sit down!” Dr. Nathan barked and pushed Kevin back into the seat. Shaking now and not understanding at all what was happening, he just did as he was told. He was frightened. He could feel his hands trembling uncontrollably and as much as he tried to still them, he found he couldn’t.

“What was that stuff?” Kevin finally mustered out, once his ability to speak came back to him. “It tastes awful.”

“You’ll be fine, just watch the movie.”

A few minutes later, Kevin found himself keeled over on the ground, puking into a bucket the man had given him. His body violently wretched and each time he thought he was done puking, another volley soon followed.

“I’m done.” Kevin gasped as he finally stood up, his legs weak and shaking. His whole body felt used, his stomach knotted and sour and his nerves frazzled. “I’m done with this, with this whole thing. You’re disgusting.”

He was hobbled toward the door when he felt Dr. Nathan’s hand on his back. “Son. That wasn’t meant to make you uncomfortable. It’s just aversion therapy, that’s all.”

“What the Hell is aversion therapy?” Kevin whispered.

“It’s when you change someone’s brain to make them not like the things they used to like.”

“Okay, I’m really done with this.” Kevin sputtered. “I’m calling my mom and telling her what you did to me. I guarantee you she’ll see it my way. She wouldn’t want her son being forced to watch porno and being given nasty stuff to make him puke. I know she wouldn’t.”

“I’ve already explained the way all of this works to your mother.” He said. “She understands.”

“You told her this would happen?” Kevin asked, in a tone of disbelief. “She—she knew?”

“It’s a standard practice.” Dr. Nathan nodded. “I know it’s unpleasant but the effects will be gone fairly quickly. You’ll be just fine.”

“How many more times were you thinking I would have to do this?” Kevin asked, trying to get a sense of what lunacy laid ahead for him.

“Maybe seven, eight more times. Then we start on boosting your attraction to women.” He said. “That will be much more pleasant.”

With that, Kevin just turned around and left, mostly so the man wouldn’t see him cry. His body felt like it had been abused from the inside out. He didn’t have enough strength to walk back to the university like he usually did, so he just called a cab.

“You alright, buddy?” The young, fresh-faced cab driver asked him as they pulled out of the
driveway. “You don’t look so good.”

“No.” Kevin admitted quietly. He could feel tears rolling down his face now. “No, I’m not.”

It seemed as though, even despite being an exhausted, hungover mess, Connor McKinley was always ready to meet guys and do some flirting. At least, it sure seemed that way to Kevin. As they were getting ready to leave the hotel for a fun-filled day at the water park, Kevin was taken aback at Connor’s choice of bathing suit. It was way too tight, he thought, and it was the perfect shade of dark blue for Connor’s light skin tone and it also hugged his curves in all the right places and good God was it short. At least, for a guy. It was much, much too short, Kevin thought to himself. Of course, the redhead also threw on a tee shirt and some sandals and he fit in just fine and it wasn’t as though he looked out of place or inappropriate or anything. He just looked so...cute?

But Kevin didn’t want to think about Connor in that way anymore. He didn’t want to think he looked cute or sexy or adorable or anything like that. That would just muddle everything up again, ruin everything he’d worked so hard for in his life. And he did work hard—he worked extremely hard to make his life as calm and uneventful and predictable as possible. Being with Connor again would disrupt everything—everything would change. Things would go back to how they used to be, back when everything was awful, and that was just unacceptable for Kevin.

No, Kevin Price was doing perfectly fine living his life this way. At least, he certainly thought so. He’d built his adult life in such a way that very little change ever happened because as long as very little ever happened, then there was a good chance that bad things also wouldn’t happen. At least, not often. His life may have been plain and simple and some may have called it boring, but it also had the advantage of having very few complications. He made it that way on purpose, after he had Charlie. His life wasn’t muddled by romance or being gay or having friends other than his best friend and his wife. And that was exactly how he liked it.

Well, okay, like may have been too strong a word. But his life was safe and normal and predictable. The sameness was preferable to having bad things happen. He’d rather have been bored than tortured any day. Even his job was boring. But still, he had Charlie and he had stability and a reasonable amount of security and that was enough for him.

It had to be enough. He wasn’t about to go through all of that hardship again. Never again. Never, ever, ever again. Adult Kevin Price was an island—well, an island plus his daughter and Arnold—a very stable, protective, solitary island.

And that was that. There was no room for disarray in the life of Kevin Price. Not anymore.

But still, after he’d gone on several water slides at the park with Charlie and the Cunninghams and they all finished sharing a bucket of French fries from the food stand, Charlie started talking about her Uncle Connor again and how her daddy promised her that Uncle Connor would go on all the water rides with her. Kevin tried to explain what a hangover was to Charlie, but of course, she didn’t understand. With a sigh, Kevin told her Connor just wasn’t feeling very well and probably preferred to just rest for a little while. But then Charlie pouted that genuine sad pout and whenever Charlie pouted that genuine sad pout, it pulled on Kevin’s heartstrings just a bit. So, he softened, wanting to make her happy, and led them both over to Connor’s lounge chair. The redhead had been perched there in his chair all morning long like a hungover vampire—covered in towels and sunscreen and a giant umbrella, his eyes shielded by the darkest sunglasses he could find.
“Boo.” Kevin said as he sat down next to Connor, on Chris’s now-vacated chair. He poked Connor in the shoulder, the bare skin beneath his finger sending a bit of a rush through his veins.

“Mmmm?” Connor hummed, reaching up to pull the towel down from over his eyes. Kevin watched him take his sunglasses off and rub the sleep out of his eyes. The poor thing had fallen asleep in his chair. A yawn escaped Connor’s mouth and Kevin let himself stare for just a moment at his wild, messy red hair that was all ruffled up from the towel. His eyes were sleepy and lidded and so, so blue and he just looked….

No. Kevin thought to himself and shook his head rather fervently. No, no, no, no, no.

Connor let out another tired yawn. “Why are you shaking your head at me?” He murmured softly, still a bit woozy from sleep.

“Sorry.” Kevin said quickly, snapping out of it. “No reason.”

“Uncle Connor!” Charlie cried out as she climbed up on Connor’s lounge chair and into his lap. “Do you want to go on a water slide with me and Daddy? Do you?”

Connor’s lips curled into a tired smile as he nodded to the little girl. “I’d love to, Charlie.”

“You’d love to?” Kevin asked, his lips curling upward just the same. “I thought you were half dead today.”

“I was.” Connor said, sitting up a little and wrapping his arms around Charlie, pulling her into a tight squeeze. “But I think a nap, plus copious amounts of Advil and iced coffee finally cured me. I actually feel almost human again.”

“Yay!” Charlie cried out happily. “Me and Daddy already went on most of the rides, but we can go on them with you again and again and again!”

Connor suddenly paled. “Um, just how big are these water slides anyway?”

Kevin rolled his eyes at Connor—Connor and his unreasonable fear of anything even remotely resembling a roller coaster.

“They’re not that bad, Connor.” Kevin said, a smirk on his face. “I promise. But just in case, we’ll hit the easy ones first, okay?”

Connor nodded. “Yeah, let me just get my clothes off and put more sunscreen on.”

He lifted Charlie up and placed her back on the floor, where she wandered a bit away and climbed onto one of the other lounge chairs the group was occupying. Tilting his head back, Connor downed the last of his iced coffee and got up to get ready to go.

A hot blush swept across Kevin’s cheeks as Connor pulled his oversized tee shirt off, tossing it back on the chair. He hadn’t meant to, but Kevin found himself staring a little at the redhead as he applied a fresh layer of sunscreen to his body, which was mostly exposed except for the bit his tight little swim shorts covered.

“Can you get my back?” Connor asked, handing a very flustered Kevin the bottle of sunscreen. “No one else is here and I’ll literally turn into a lobster if I’m not completely covered.”

“Oh, um, sure. I guess.” Kevin stuttered as he nervously squirted a blob of the white substance into his hands. Part of him relished in the feeling of rubbing the cream into the bare skin of Connor’s back
while the other side of his brain was doing nothing but shaking its head at himself for even having those thoughts about another man.

_It’s wrong_, he told himself in a rather harsh voice. _You can’t have those feelings anymore. Your life is perfect exactly the way it is. You don’t need this. You don’t need him. You can’t. You just can’t. Not again. Not ever again. It causes too many problems. It hurts too much. And Charlie, you can’t do that to Charlie. You just can’t._

After the top of Connor’s back was completely covered, he anxiously moved down to get his lower back. As he did so, he noticed how badly his hands were physically shaking.

_Calm down_, he told himself. _Deep breaths._

He took in a couple of deep breaths and kept going, only stopping once he got to the waistband of Connor’s swim shorts. When he was finally done, he immediately yanked his hands away, wiping the extra sunscreen off his hands on his own shorts.

“All done.” Kevin choked out rather hoarsely once Connor’s back was fully covered.

“Thanks.” He heard Connor say before the redhead turned back around to face him. After he turned back around, Kevin noticed the expression on Connor’s face instantly change. He now looked overwhelmingly…surprised? Surprised and confused and kind of happy about something.

“Are you actually…_blushing_?” Connor asked incredulously, a twinge of a smile ready to play at his lips.

Kevin’s eyes widened in shock at the question. Was he that transparent? _No, no, no._ He ardently shook his head to indicate that no, he absolutely was _not_ blushing, and bent down to add his sunglasses and tee shirt to the pile of things they would leave behind on the lounge chairs.

“I do believe you _are_ blushing, Kevin Price.” Connor observed giddily, his grin now stupidly large. “Now why would you be blushing? Because, if I remember correctly, you ‘don’t like men like that anymore’.” He made air quotes with his hands as he repeated Kevin’s own words back to him before taking a moment to pause. “Right? I mean, if you don’t like men like that anymore, then why would touching another man make you blush? Unless…hmm, unless maybe you still kind of do.”

“I am _not_ blushing.” Kevin said hotly, all warm and flustered now at having been caught. He gestured to nothing. “It’s really sunny out here and my face is burning. I get sunburn too, you know. You’re not the only person in the world who gets sunburn.”

“Oh, I see.” Connor nodded, his brow creased in thought as though he was actually thinking over Kevin’s bullshit answer, but Kevin knew he wasn’t. He also knew something sarcastic was about to come out of Connor’s mouth.

“So you’re telling me that you managed to get that much sunburn in the span of two minutes while you were putting sunscreen on my back?” Connor asked, that same bemused smile still on his face. “Hmm…I don’t know, Kevin, that kind of sounds like _magic_ or something.”

“Shut up.” Kevin snapped. “Just shut up. I wasn’t blushing and you know it. So just stop it.”

“Don’t blame me.” Connor whistled nonchalantly, that giant smug grin still on his face. “You had your chance, Kevin. It’s not my fault you threw it all away for no apparent reason.”

“Can we please just _go_ now?” Kevin asked hotly, aggravated now at this stupid game. “Charlie’s
waiting to go on the rides. We haven’t got all day, you know. The water park closes at five.”

“We can go.” Connor said airily, still clearly amused by Kevin’s accidental blush. “But, um, is it okay if I walk in front of you or will you be too distracted by all this?” The redhead waved his hands up and down, gesturing to his own body, in a way that just looked so silly, Kevin actually almost laughed at the quip.

He almost laughed. Maybe he would have found it funnier if there weren’t a gigantic, glaring ring of truth to Connor’s lame joke. Kevin wholeheartedly wished there wasn’t. That would make all of this so much easier to deal with if there wasn’t. But there was—and that was the honest truth, as much as it pained Kevin to admit it to himself.

“Very funny.” Was all Kevin ended up saying, a small smile playing at his lips. He bent down and lifted Charlie up into his arms. “After you.” He said to Connor, gesturing for him to start walking.

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The minute Kevin got back to his dorm, tears still streaming down his face, he checked to make sure his new roommate, Benny, wasn’t there. Well, even if he was, Benny was pretty cool. Kevin was even pretty close to calling him a friend.

Trembling, Kevin dialed Connor’s number and waited for what seemed like a very long two seconds for him to pick up.

“Hey, sweetie.” Connor said happily as he answered the phone. “How are you?”

Kevin felt a gigantic feeling of relief flood over his body at the sound of Connor’s voice.

“Hey.” Kevin managed to croak out, his voice painfully cracked. He was so happy to hear Connor's voice. It soothed him. It made him feel like maybe, just maybe, everything might be okay again.

“You sound awful.” Connor said, his tone full of concern. “Is something wrong, Kev?”

Kevin froze for a long time. Well, at least, a long time to pause mid-conversation. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to just open up and tell him everything that had been going on or if it would be better to just keep it a secret.

“I’m, um, I’m not doing so great, Connor.” Kevin whispered. Tears were streaming down his face. He swallowed hard and tried his best not to break out sobbing. “I really need to see you. Can I see you?”

“See me?” Connor asked, softly. “You mean like on FaceTime?”

With that, Kevin accidentally allowed a tearful sound to escape his throat. “No, I want to really see you. I want to feel your arms around me. That’s what I want.” He let out a hiccup, followed by a sniffle.

He knew Connor would know he was crying, but he didn’t really care anymore. He just wanted to be in Connor’s arms, hear his voice, fall asleep next to him like they used to.

“Okay, sweetie. Shhh. Don’t cry. It’s okay.” Connor said in that sweet, soothing way he had about him that Kevin loved so much. “We can’t see each other right now, remember? We’re not in the same state, silly. Let’s do a FaceTime, okay?”
“Okay.” Kevin conceded with a sniffle. “Let me just get my pajamas on.”

“Me too.” Connor said. “I was just about to get ready for bed. Five minutes and I’ll FaceTime you, deal?”

“Deal.” Kevin said, managing a small, tearful smile.

He slipped off his clothes that were covered in sick remnants and threw them in the hamper. He rummaged through his drawer and tried to find the comfiest thing he could, something that might make him feel a little bit better. He pulled out one of his favorite Disney boxer shorts, the ones with the ducks on them, and a Pirates of the Caribbean tee. He made himself a quick cup of herbal tea and got into the bed with his laptop.

He anxiously waited for a couple of minutes while Connor changed. Finally, the little ding on the screen signaled Connor was FaceTiming him. When he finally saw Connor on the screen, snuggled in his bed as well, he had to use all of his strength not to break out crying.

“I love you so much.” Kevin blurted out, fresh tears welling up in his eyes. “I love you so, so much.”

“I love you too.” Connor said with a smile as he adjusted his computer so the view was better. “There you go.”

Kevin let out a small sob, making Connor’s smile turn upside down.

“Kevin, what’s going on?” Connor asked softly. Kevin could see the concern written all over his face. “Kevin? You’re crying. Why are you crying?”

“I don’t know.” He lied with a big sniffle. “I just needed to see you. I miss you. I miss you so much it’s killing me.”

“I miss you too, but you need to calm down, sweetheart. You look like you’re starting to hyperventilate. Take in a deep breath.” He did. “Okay, another one.” After a few moments, Kevin looked as though he returned to normal breathing again.

“I’m okay.” Kevin said with a forced smile.

Finally, he got a good look at Connor without all the hysterics clouding up his mind. He looked positively adorable like that, all cuddled up in his blankets. He had a heart-shaped rainbow pride pillow sticking out behind him and the teddy bear Kevin had gotten him last Christmas, Mr. Biggles, wrapped up in his arms.

“You have Mr. Biggles.” Kevin let out a tearful giggle. “How’s he handling the big city?”

“I mean, he doesn’t like the crowds or the subway, but he’s getting used to it.” Connor smirked as he brought the bear up to his chin. They gazed at one another for a while, peacefully, both of them happy just to be looking into the other’s eyes.

“Kevin.” Connor whispered after a while. “You look terrible.”

“What?” Kevin asked, confused at what he meant by that.

“No, no, I don’t mean terrible like that… I mean you look gaunt and pale and your face is literally covered in tears. You look like you’ve lost weight, but not in the good way.” Connor said, his eyes worried. He reached out a hand towards the screen as if he could somehow touch Kevin, but he couldn’t, of course. “Is something going on? Are you stressed out about something? You can tell me
anything, sweetie. That's what I'm here for.”

“I’m fine.” Kevin shook his head, trying to smooth his hair back. “Really.”

“You don’t look fine to me.” Connor said, worried. “You look like the complete opposite of fine.”

“Well, I am…fine.” Kevin said confidently, forcing a smile back on his face. “Except I miss you, all the time. When’s our next visit again? November?”

“Yeah, I’ll be home for Thanksgiving.” Connor said with a smile. “My family said you can come over if you want, but I know you usually do it with your family.”

“That sounds perfect.” Kevin said quickly. “I’d love to come.”

A big grin appeared on Connor’s face. “Great. It’s a date then.”

“It’s a date.” Kevin smiled sadly. He reached out his hand to try and touch Connor too, but of course, it didn’t work like that. “Can we sleep like this tonight?”

“You mean on FaceTime?” Connor asked with a confused laugh.

“Yeah, we can lay like this until we fall asleep.” Kevin said softly. “I’ve been having trouble sleeping lately and I didn’t have a very good day today and I just—can you please stay with me? I’m begging you.”

“You don’t have to beg me, sweetie. I’m your boyfriend.” Connor said. “It’s my job to make you feel better after a bad day, isn’t it?”

Kevin nodded. “Tell me about your day. Tell me all about that show, the one you’re watching right now—the one about the drag queens. Tell me everything.”

Connor beamed and went off about his day and classes and tv shows and Kevin just gazed at him, taking in the sweet melody of his voice. Eventually, it lulled him to sleep and Connor did as he said he would and stayed right there, with him, all night long.

Kevin, Connor and Charlie all went on several water slides for the next hour or so. They were slowly working their way up to the larger ones, on account of Connor’s fear of high, fast moving rides that resembled roller coasters.

“This one looks kind of…big, don’t you think?” Connor asked nervously as they walked up the seemingly never-ending staircase. The bigger the staircase, the bigger the ride.

“Will you just relax?” Kevin advised as they walked up the last couple of steps to the top. “You’ll be fine. Look at Charlie, she’s not scared.” He paused and looked down at his little girl. His brave, fearless little girl. “You’re not scared, are you?”

“Nope!” She cried out and raced toward the attendant who was placing riders in these giant family sized tubes.

“Kevin?” Connor asked seriously after a moment, a worried look on his face. “Am I a…wimp? Like, would you consider me to be a wimpy person?”
“Yeah, you’re a total wimp.” Kevin said with a big smile. “Biggest wimp I know.”

That earned him an annoyed side eye and playful punch from Connor. “Jerk.”

“Ow.” Kevin whined, rubbing his arm.

“Look, Daddy, we all ride together on this one!” Charlie shouted, pointing to the giant family size tubes, as they waited on line to go down the slide. “Look!”

“I see, Charlie.” Kevin said, swallowing the lump in his throat. He wasn’t exactly looking forward to being smushed inside a family tube with a half-naked Connor wearing very tight short shorts. But, anything for his little girl.

When it was their turn to go, Kevin sat in the back with Charlie in front of him and Connor in the front. He was just trying to not have to touch or be squished up against Connor, that’s all. But then all of his plans were foiled.

“Smallest to biggest.” The attendant said, gesturing them to rearrange themselves.

“Excuse me?” Kevin asked, confused. “What—what does that mean?”

“The kid has to be in front, then your friend, then you. Smallest to biggest.” The man ordered, gesturing to the group to rearrange themselves before he would let them down the slide. Connor and Charlie seemed to think nothing of it and did as they were told, leaving Kevin to still be in the farthest spot in the back.

Connor noticed the panicked look on Kevin’s face as he sat down in front of him.

“Are you okay?” The redhead asked, worriedly. Kevin didn’t answer right away. “Okay, see, I’m already worried so the fact that you look worried too really worries me. Do you think the ride is safe? Why does it have to be smallest to biggest? Is there a risk of the tube flying out or something? Why would it matter what order we’re in?”

Kevin couldn’t help but chuckle at Connor’s silly worries about the safety of the ride. “The ride is safe, Connor. Just turn around and hold onto Charlie.”

“If it’s so ‘safe’, then why do I have to hold her?” Connor asked, his voice veering on panic now as he wrapped his arms snugly around the little girl in front of him. “And why aren’t there any seatbelts on these things?”

Kevin couldn’t concentrate on Connor’s senseless worries. All he could think about was the fact that Connor was right in front of him with his butt now pressed up in between Kevin’s legs, resting against his…thing. He didn’t like this at all. It was making him feel things—things he hadn’t felt in a very long time. He could see the other families all going down the slide on their tubes, most people clutching onto each other for support. Kevin clutched the flimsy little handles instead. He wasn’t about to wrap his arms around a very half-naked Connor with his soft, round butt pressed up against his…well, his you know.

As the attendant pushed them down the slide, the gravity and inertia pushed Connor even further into Kevin, making him let out a strange noise. He knew he was blushing quite hotly now. He liked the feeling of having Connor so close to him, so close to him without any clothes on except those shorts, but the problem was, he didn’t want to like it. He wanted to think it was disgusting, wanted to despise it, wanted to hate it. He wanted to hate…Connor. But he couldn’t. He just couldn’t. Of course he couldn’t. He just wished this whole thing wasn’t making his body feel things it wasn’t supposed to feel. He tried to lean back, away from Connor, but it was no use.
As they flew down the slide, Connor screamed...and screamed and screamed and screamed, in sheer terror. The handles were useless and Kevin was forced to at least partially hold onto Connor. He didn’t want to, but he had no choice. Well, he did want to but he didn’t want to. It was all very complicated. He did hope, at the very least, that Kevin’s arms around him may make him a little less terrified of the ride.

As they went over a couple of hills, Connor’s bottom bounced up and down, landing and rubbing against Kevin’s privates. He made another weird noise and he felt...he felt himself getting a little stiff, down there.

No, no, no, no. Kevin shook his head. He felt a well of tears forming behind his eyes. You are not getting a boner at Disney World. You are not getting a boner with Connor and certainly not from Connor. Your daughter is here. You’re with your goddamn daughter. You’re disgusting. You’re filthy and disgusting.

He felt his hands start to shake a little, but luckily, he didn’t think Connor would notice. The other man was still screaming his head off in terror anyway.

Finally, their tube landed in the pool at the end of the ride, all of their bodies being hurled out of the tube and splashing Merrily into the water. Kevin laughed as his body hit the water, despite how anxious he felt no more than a moment ago. He loved water rides. And that was a fact that would never change.

He watched Connor shake his head and rub the water out of his eyes as he popped up from under the water with Charlie still in his arms.

“Can you swim, sweetie?” Connor asked the little girl with a big smile as he balanced her on his hip.

“No, I can’t swim!” Charlie cried out in a panic. “Don’t let me go!”

“Shhh, shhh, don’t worry, I got you.” Connor cooed and playfully brushed his nose up against the little girl’s. “I won’t let you go, silly.”

And in that moment, Kevin felt his heart do something really weird. It felt so, so weird. He already knew Connor adored Charlie. That much was evident from the first moment they met the day they arrived in Orlando. But he didn’t expect Connor to be so...good with her too. They just fit together so well, Connor and Charlie. Charlie loved being with him, with her Uncle Connor. Kevin knew that because she told him all the time. Connor seemed to love being with her right back. Kevin knew damn well that Connor still wasn’t feeling that great and that he got terrified of fast rides, but still, he came on the rides with them anyway, regardless—because of Charlie. Because he wanted to make Charlie happy. Because he wanted to make his daughter smile.

And that just did really weird things to Kevin’s feelings. The emotion was so strong that he had trouble pushing it out of his mind, like he usually did with emotions like that revolving around Connor. And he was usually so good at pushing them out. But this emotion he felt right then as he watched Connor take care of his little girl with a big smile on his face was stronger than his ability to push it out. Much stronger.

“You okay?” Connor asked Kevin quietly as they made their way to the next ride. “You hardly said two words since we got off the ride.”

“I’m fine.” Kevin lied, giving him a weak nod and even weaker smile. “Just a little tired.”

“You’re all red again.” Connor observed with an amused smirk. “More spontaneous sunburn, huh?
You know, the kind that comes and goes whenever you put your hands on another man? You should really get that looked at.”

Connor’s blunt quip made Kevin’s cheeks redden even further and he just wished he could have died right there.

“I told you to stop it, didn’t I? Please just *stop it.*” Kevin whispered tersely, his eyes welling back up with tears that he would *not* let fall. Never—he would never let them fall. Not in front of Connor. “It’s not funny. I’m not laughing.”

And the look he gave Connor was so dead serious and grave and pleading and desperate that Connor’s face instantly turned from amused to concerned in the span of a split second.

“Okay,” Connor said, softly. “I’ll stop.” He paused for a moment, slowing down his pace so that Charlie was walking a bit ahead of them instead of right next to them. He reached out his hand and rested it on Kevin’s shoulder, probably in an attempt to calm him down. “Is there something you’re not telling me, Kevin?”

“What?” Kevin asked incredulously, as though the very idea was blasphemous. He moved away from Connor so that his hand would fall off his shoulder. “No, of course not. Where is this even coming from?”

“You seemed fine before.” Connor said, quietly. “And now you don’t.”

“I *am* fine.” Kevin insisted.

“You don’t have to be afraid.” Connor continued, his tone gentle. “I won’t get mad at you or anything. If you have something to tell me, I want to hear it. No matter what it is.” He paused for a moment and lowered his voice. “I mean it, Kevin. I still care about you, you know. I know I don’t always act like it, but I do.”

“Let’s just get to the next ride, okay?” Kevin asked, ignoring the question entirely. “They’re gonna close in less than two hours.”

He sped up and caught up to Charlie, leaving Connor alone to walk a bit behind them, undoubtedly even more worried about Kevin now, after that.

Why did he have to keep doing this? Kevin asked himself over and over again. He used to be amazing at hiding his feelings. Even from Arnold, his best friend in the whole world. Now it seemed as though, the longer he spent time with Connor, the more they began seeping out all over the damn place for everyone and their mother to see.

Well, he couldn’t let that happen, could he? He would just need to be better, that’s all. He needed to get this mess under control. This wasn’t how Kevin’s life was supposed to be—not anymore. Kevin’s life, at least these days, was supposed to be predictable and safe and fine.

And everything Connor was making him feel lately felt like the complete opposite of fine.
Chapter 6: Tiki Tom's

A couple of days later, the group was all gathered around the pool bar at the hotel after a fun-filled day spent at Hollywood Studios. They had been hitting the parks pretty hard for the past five days, usually staying at the park until closing, but all of the adults just wanted to get back to the hotel early that night so they could unwind and relax a little. They all agreed to spend either the next day or the day after as a designated “hotel pool day” where they could all just chill out around the pool and let their feet rest a little. The kids were even okay with that plan too. Charlie absolutely adored the pool—Kevin often called her his 'little fish'—and Harrison, though a little afraid of swimming pools, was looking forward to hitting the arcade and enjoying some of the other fun activities the hotel had to offer.

It was around eight o’clock in the evening now and the sun was beginning to set beneath the horizon. Connor, Chris, and James were all gabbing together at the outdoor pool bar, happily sipping on their first cocktails of the evening, while Kevin was sitting nearby, sipping on a soda with the kids scampering around beneath his feet. A few of the other Elders had gone for a walk around the hotel grounds, checking out the various amenities like hot tubs and hammocks. All in all, in was a calm evening spent with good friends.

“Do you think we should invite Kevin?” Connor whispered to Chris and James after they finished finalizing their plan for the evening. They would all be going out that night to check out Tiki Tom’s, a tropical-themed gay tiki bar not too far from the hotel.

“Why on Earth would you ask Kevin to go to a gay bar?” Chris asked as though the idea was completely off-the-walls, bat-shit crazy. “I thought you said you weren’t getting sucked back into this?”

“I’m not.” Connor insisted before taking in a long sip of his drink. He loved Chris, but the man really
held a grudge. Sometimes it seemed as though Chris was more angry about the break-up than Connor was—not more hurt by any means, but just angrier.

Connor continued on. “I just thought it might be nice to ask him, that’s all. Arnold told me he hasn’t really been out much since his daughter was born.”

“Well, that’s what you get for having a kid at twenty-two.” Chris quipped.

Connor felt a bit affronted at that. He knew very well that Kevin never regretted having Charlie. Never. He loved her with all of his heart and wouldn’t change a goddamn thing.

"That’s an ugly thing to say." Connor chastised. "I’ve never heard Kevin complain about having Charlie. Not even once. This is all coming from Arnold. He told me Kevin’s been a bit of a recluse for the past few years and thinks a night out with people his own age would be good for him, that’s all. And I agree with him.”

"You know I didn't mean anything against Charlie." Chris said, softer now. He paused for a moment to think. "Does anyone know the deal with that by the way? Why he had her so young? It just seems awfully odd.”

“No.” Connor sighed sadly and shook his head. "I don't even think Arnold knows the whole story, to be honest. And if he does, he hasn't told anyone.”

Chris’s eyes widened at that. “Wow.”

“I know.” Connor sighed. “Anyway, I just think it would be nice to at least ask him, no?”

“Fine. But I don’t have to like it.” Chris conceded.

“Hey.” James nudged his husband in the stomach. “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice.” Chris scoffed. “I’m nice to everyone who hasn’t broken my best friend’s heart. That means I’m nice to like…ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-nine-nine-nine percent of everyone. I think that’s pretty good.”

“You need to lighten up on Kevin.” James said, softly. "I heard he’s been going through a really rough time these past few years. At least, that's what it sounds like according to Arnold.”

“I second that.” Connor piped in. "We’re going to invite him and you need to be nice, okay?” He gave Chris another playful nudge.

“You know what, you’re right. It sounds like a great idea. Why don’t you go ask your sexually repressed ex-boyfriend who doesn’t drink and doesn’t dance and acts borderline homophobic even though he’s clearly gay but married a woman anyway probably just to prove he’s not gay, to go to a gay bar with us.” He nodded to Connor. "See how that works out for you.”

“That isn’t being nice.” Connor shook his head with a smirk. “Try again.”

“Fine.” Chris sighed in resignation. “Go ask Kevin to see if he wants to come hang out with us tonight.” He said, as though he were reciting something he really didn’t want to be reciting.

“And?” Connor urged.

Chris rolled his eyes. “And I promise to be nice.”

Connor nodded with approval before walking over to where Kevin was sitting, staring at the sports
game on TV and sipping on some kind of soda.

“Hey, Kev.” Connor greeted him. “Chris and James and I are thinking about going to that gay tiki bar we saw on our way in and we were, um...we were wondering if maybe you might want to come with us.” Connor offered as he took a seat on the barstool next to the brunette. He waited for an answer for solid few moments but it never came. Kevin just kept his eyes on the big TV.

“Yoo hoo? Kev?” Connor waved a hand in front of Kevin’s eyes, trying to get his attention.

“Huh?” Kevin turned around to face Connor, a confused look on his face. “Are you talking to me?”

Connor looked around, confused. “Is there another Kevin around here I should know about?”

Kevin shook his head, seeming all flustered now. “No, but why would I want to go to a...gay bar?” He asked as though the very idea was ludicrous. “I’m not—I’m not gay.” He stammered awkwardly and not very convincingly.

“Yes, you are.”

Kevin glared at him for a moment. “No, I’m not.”

“You can keep on telling yourself that until you’re blue in the face, it doesn’t make it any less true.” Connor smirked, knowing he was teetering dangerously on the border of Kevin's tolerance.

“Please don’t—don’t say that kind of thing here.” Kevin whispered, glancing around nervously at all of the people sitting at the bar. “We’re in public, Connor. There are people all around here.”

Connor rolled his eyes. “Whatever, I still think you’d have fun if you came along with us. It’ll be more exciting than sitting here, staring at,” he gestured to the screen, “whatever sportsball this is.”

“It’s football.” Kevin corrected dryly. “I happen to like football.”

That made Connor roll his eyes yet again. He knew very well that Kevin didn’t like football.

“Anyway, I’m not—,” Kevin started before getting interrupted.

“Relax, Kevin,” Connor cut him off, his voice soothing. He placed a hand on Kevin’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “Going out with some old friends to a gay bar doesn’t make you any gayer than you already are, trust me.”

“I’m not gay.” Kevin whispered, hotly. Connor could see the other man’s face was getting redder with each passing moment and he was starting to fidget anxiously in his seat. “Will you please stop saying things like that in front of people?” The brunette whispered angrily, looking around at the patrons sitting at the bar, probably hoping none of them had heard Connor’s words. He looked positively ashamed.

“Alright, alright, calm down.” Connor cooed, softly. “I just think you could use a fun night out on the town, that’s all. And Arnold agrees with me. He told me you’ve basically had no social life for the past five years and if anyone deserves to cut loose a little and have some fun, it’s you.” He grinned and gave Kevin a play-punch to the shoulder. “And I already checked with Arnold and Naba and they are more than happy to watch Charlie for you tonight. Thrilled, actually. They just want you to have some adult fun, that’s all.”

“Look, I get that people are concerned about me or whatever.” Kevin sighed and looked back down into his soda with a shrug. “But, I just...I don’t know, Connor. I wouldn’t be any fun anyway. I
don’t dance, I don’t like talking to strangers, I don’t really drink…”

“I’m sure they have—,” Connor waved to Kevin’s glass, “whatever this is that you’re drinking.”

“Diet ginger ale?” He perked up, hopefully.

Connor’s lips curled up into a soft smile at that. Kevin was so sweet sometimes that all Connor wanted to do was just eat him up. Well, not literally eat him up, but he did have an overwhelming desire to lay a big kiss right on his lips.

“Yes, I’m sure they have plenty of diet ginger ale at the bar.” Connor assured, giving Kevin his best twinkle-eyed smile. “Now are you coming with us or not?”

“I don’t know.” Kevin shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, come on, Kevin.” Connor gently prodded. “It wouldn’t kill you to spend some time with me without the kids around, you know. We are trying to be friends again, aren’t we?”

Kevin’s eyes widened at that. “We—we are?”

“Yes, we are.” Connor affirmed, a tiny smile tugging at his lips. “Wait, you mean you didn’t get the memo?” He asked, feigning surprise.

Kevin’s eyes softened a bit at Connor’s stupid joke, a small smile appearing on his face, too. It seemed as though Connor still knew how to charm Kevin Price, even if only a little.

“No, are you coming with us or not?” Connor asked again, laying a gentle hand on Kevin’s shoulder. “I promise I won’t make you do any tequila shots or get a lap dance. I know you like to keep things PG, you big dork.”

Kevin laughed again, a real, genuine laugh that made a warm sensation bloom in Connor’s chest.

“Well, I guess there’s no harm in checking it out, right?” Kevin conceded, looking up at Connor. “I’m sure it won’t be nearly as bad as I’m expecting it to be.”

“Such enthusiasm.” Connor smirked, pulling Kevin up by his sleeve. “I’m flattered.”

***

Several weeks had gone by since Kevin’s first session with the “doctor”. It was now November and Kevin’s second visit with Connor since leaving to go to school would soon be upon them. Excited, relieved, and stressed—he was feeling a multitude of conflicting emotions about seeing Connor again after a whole two months of being apart. Relieved because he’d finally be able to fall asleep in Connor’s arms again. When he was in Connor’s arms or Connor was in his, everything seemed almost alright with the world. He was excited because, heck, he hadn’t seen his boyfriend in nearly two months and it was starting to weigh on them a little. And, yet, still, he was also quite stressed—stressed because the boy that Connor was coming home to visit wasn’t exactly the same boy he'd left at the airport the last time they were together. No, Kevin’s life had gotten much darker, sadder, and more complicated since then.

What he didn’t realize was just how much more complicated it was about to become.

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“Welcome, Kevin.” Dr. Nathan greeted him as he sullenly walked into the man’s office—the office
he’d begun to absolutely despise over the past five weeks. In that time, he’d been forced to discuss his sex life, watch gay pornography during which he’d been induced to vomit and even once, he had been hooked up to a strange device that was designed to inflict pain as he watched yet more gay pornography. It wasn’t awful pain by any means, but it was still frightening and scary and Kevin was growing increasingly depressed and anxious because of it.

But today, Dr. Nathan promised him they would be moving onto the next phase of “treatment”, a phase that would undoubtedly prove more pleasant than the weeks prior.

“Come in, come in.” Dr. Nathan prodded to Kevin and patted the familiar chair Kevin hated so much. It was his chair—the chair in which nothing but horrible things happened to Kevin Price.

“Well, don’t be rude, Kevin.” Dr. Nathan chided. “It’s customary to say 'hello' when coming into a person’s home, isn’t it?”

Kevin just sighed. He was too tired for this bullshit today. He was too tired for this bullshit every day.

“Hello.” Kevin eventually replied, dryly.

“Well, we’ll work on that.” Dr. Nathan said. “Now, I have someone coming into our session today who I hope will prove quite useful in persuading your body that it has the capability of responding sexually to women.”

Kevin just rolled his eyes. He was so done with all of this. So beyond done.

“Here, drink this.” Dr. Nathan said and handed him a steaming cup of hot tea. “It'll help you relax.”

Kevin looked down at the tea. It looked a little cloudy but Kevin sipped on it anyway. It tasted okay.

“Did you say someone was coming here?” Kevin asked, warily. “Why would someone be coming here?”

“Just wait a few minutes and drink your tea, son.” He said. “I’ll be in the other room for a bit, getting her ready. Just stay here and sip on your tea. Make sure to drink all of it.”

Kevin creased his eyebrows at that. Why did he have to drink all of it? Why was there a girl here? This wasn’t getting any better at all. The man had promised him that it would get better but it wasn’t. Nothing ever got better.

At least you’ll be seeing Connor next week. He told himself in a soothing voice as he closed his eyes and tried his hardest to just relax. He picked up his tea and took in a long sip. You’ll be with Connor and his mom for Thanksgiving. You finally have something to look forward too. Something that’ll be really nice.

Connor’s mom was more accepting of their relationship than Kevin’s parents were, so he knew it wouldn’t be so bad. Before they went off to different colleges, Kevin spent a lot of time at the McKinley’s—mostly trying to escape the Hell that was his own house.

Kevin told his parents he was going to Arnold’s for Thanksgiving this year. It wasn’t a total lie since Arnold and Naba said they would stop by Connor’s house to see them. It was going to be nothing short of amazing, seeing Connor and his friends again.

Everything will be okay. Kevin thought, forcing some semblance of a smile onto his face. At least, next week will be okay. You’ll worry about everything else after. All you have to do next week is
“Wow.” Kevin said as he stared, wide-eyed, at the open displays of hedonism going on in front of his eyes. “This is...so much worse than I was expecting it to be.”

Connor didn’t hear a word he was saying. The redhead was already leaning over the bar, giving the bartender his best smile to try and catch his attention. He was such a goddamn flirt, Kevin thought to himself with a head shake.

Kevin sighed sadly as he looked over to where James and Chris had already taken their seats in the lounge area—James with his arm wrapped around Chris’s shoulders as he gave the other man tiny little kisses all over his cheek. Not wanting to be the third wheel or anything, Kevin staggered over to where Connor was attempting to charm the bartender into taking his order before the others.

“How much longer are we gonna be here?” Kevin complained glumly as he plopped down onto a barstool next to Connor. “This place is like Pandora’s box of sin.”

“Oh, quit your whining.” The redhead rolled his eyes and wrapped a friendly arm around Kevin’s shoulders, pulling him into a squeeze. “It’s going to be fun, I promise.”

“For you, maybe.” Kevin retorted. “You like men and alcohol. This is probably like Disney World for you.”

Connor glanced at him knowingly. “You do know we’re literally in Disney World right now, right?”

“You know what I meant.” Kevin clarified with a tired sigh. “Anyway, technically you’re incorrect. This is Lake Buena Vista. We’re not even remotely inside Disney World. Although, since Disney technically owns the town of Lake Buena Vista, I guess you could call it Disney. But it’s not Disney World.”

“It’s comforting to know some things never change.” Connor smiled sadly, for what reason Kevin didn’t know. “You are still a gigantic dork, Kevin Price.”

Kevin just scowled at the comment.

The bartender finally caught Connor’s twinkling blue eyes from the other side of the bar. Kevin watched on as his redhead ex-boyfriend preened a bit as he waved the bartender over, suddenly choosing to play flirtatiously with his hair. And he had that look in his eyes again as he turned the coyness of his smile up a few notches.

“Hey, cutie.” The bartender greeted Connor, flashing a bright smile. Kevin just rolled his eyes. Was there any gay man in the world who didn’t fall for Connor’s flirty smile? Because it sure didn’t seem like it, to Kevin. “What can I get for you tonight?”

“Oh, hi there—,” Connor looked at the man’s name tag with a grin, “Bernie. We’ll have three lime margaritas over ice with extra lime and salt on the rim, please. And I guess I wouldn’t mind if you felt like pouring just a teensy bit of extra tequila in mine, but that’s entirely up to you.”

“You got it.” The bartender gave Connor a wink. “Anything else?”
Kevin cleared his throat loudly at that—he was promised a diet ginger ale, after all.

“Oh, right,” Connor said, amused, “and one sad diet ginger ale for Mr. Straight Edge over here.”

Kevin grit his teeth at the remark, watching as the bartender had a chuckle at his expense before walking away.

“Why did I even agree to this?” Kevin asked himself, letting out a pained groan. He leaned his elbows against the bar, allowing his face to fall into his hands. “I should have never let you talk me into coming here. I just don’t belong in places like this, Connor.”

“Here we go again.” Connor sighed, sadly, as though he knew this would happen but was hoping it wouldn’t. “What is it that’s making you so uncomfortable now, Kevin? Is it the alcohol or all the men around you openly displaying their sexuality?”

“Both.” Kevin mumbled. He lifted his face out of his palms in favor of pulling nervously at the hem of his shirt. “I just feel really out of place here, that’s all.” He shrugged shyly.

“You know, that’s why people drink at bars, Kevin. It loosens the tension, makes it easier to talk to people, to dance.” Connor hummed to himself for a moment. “But you already know all about that, don’t you?”

Kevin’s cheeks flushed pink. Connor was undoubtedly referring to the scene they’d made at Davis’s wedding two years ago, where Kevin had way too much to drink and started getting touchy-feely with Connor in front of everyone. Their brief romantic excursion was shortly followed up by a heated fight, of course—probably the worst fight they’d ever been in to date. Kevin was pretty sure Davis still hadn’t really forgiven them for that. He said he did, but Kevin could sometimes see on his face that he was still a little annoyed about it.

“I told you to never bring that up again, didn’t I?” Kevin reminded the redhead tersely. “Didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“Then why on Earth are you bringing it up now?” Kevin asked, exasperated. “Just to make me feel even more uncomfortable? Sad? Ashamed? Angry?”

“No, of course not.” Connor said earnestly, his face falling just a little. “I’m not bringing it up for any of those reasons and you know it. What kind of friend do you think I am?”

“Not a very good one.” Kevin answered coldly, turning away from Connor in favor of facing down at his lap.

“Well, you’re wrong, Kevin.” Connor said, sadly. He leaned in to rest his hand on Kevin’s shoulders. “I am a good friend. You’re just too thick-headed to see it. I only brought it up to remind you that this person you’ve decided to be for the past six years—this repressed, closed off, judgmental, anti-social person,” Connor gestured to Kevin, “—isn’t who you really are, Kevin.”

“It is me.”

“No.” Connor said, quietly, his sad blue eyes revealing the hurt inside of him like an open book. “It’s not.”

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A few minutes later, Dr. Nathan returned with a young girl who looked to be around Kevin’s age.
She was startlingly pretty with bright green eyes and bouncy reddish brown curls. She looked a little bit shy and had on a pink oversized sweater and a short pleated skirt. Her skin was pale and freckled and her thighs were a little thick. She almost reminded him of Connor, in some ways, he thought to himself with a small smile.

His smile instantly turned upside down when it hit him why she was probably here. Was she...was she here for...him? Was Dr. Nathan expecting him to touch her and...do things to her? And why on Earth would this poor young girl agree to do this anyway? For money? It had to be for money. Why else would someone volunteer to be someone else's weird conversion therapy sex toy? It didn’t make any sense. None of this made any sense.

Kevin felt his stomach knot up, souring the moment Dr. Nathan brought her over, placing her in front of him, as though she weren’t even a human being, but instead were an object on display for some kind of exhibit.

“Alright, Kevin. I want you to meet Marjorie.” He said to Kevin, a big smile on his face. “Marjorie, say hello to Kevin. Go on.”

She gave Kevin a little wave and weak smile. “Hi, Kevin.”

Kevin’s heart felt as though it were breaking into a thousand pieces. This poor girl. Why was she doing this?

“Hi.” Kevin eventually choked out. “Nice to meet you.”

“Now we all know why we’re here today.” Dr. Nathan went on, turning towards Marjorie. “Like many of the other boys I treat, Kevin here is struggling with homosexual feelings and it’s my job to try and sway his brain and body to become normal again.” He turned back to Kevin. “Marjorie’s been my little helper for several years now. Haven’t you, honey?”

Several years? Kevin thought to himself in horror. She couldn’t have been over twenty years old. How many years could she possibly have been legally doing this?

No, no, no, no...it’s just too weird.

Kevin watched in absolute shock as the man lifted the pink sweater off the girl's body and tossed it to the side. He followed it up by unbuttoning the first few buttons of her blouse, revealing the woman's rather plump breasts. She wasn't wearing a bra, Kevin guessed because the man probably told her not to. It all made Kevin feel sick to his stomach. This poor girl. Why was she doing this?

“Give me your hand, Kevin.” Dr. Nathan instructed softly. When Kevin didn’t budge, the doctor reached over and tried to forcibly grab his hand, but the young man resisted.

“Please don’t—don’t make me do this.” Kevin choked out. “I don’t want to do this. Please. It’s not right. This has nothing to do with me liking boys, I just don't think it's right. Nothing could possibly make this right.”

“Not right?” Dr. Nathan asked bitterly. “Not right is you sleeping with that boy, Mr. Price.”

“Connor and I haven’t slept together. At least, not—not all the way. Not yet.” Kevin whispered hoarsely. “And you know it.”

“What we’re doing here is perfectly okay, young man. We’re just trying to help you. Now you will accept this treatment and you will do what I say or I'll call your parents right now and tell them you’ve stopped cooperating. Is that what you want me to do?”
Kevin felt tears boiling behind his eyes.

“No.” He finally whispered. He lifted a trembling hand and reluctantly handed it to Dr. Nathan.

The doctor wasted no time. Within the span of a few seconds, Dr. Nathan had forced Kevin to fondle the girl’s breasts. Shortly after, he lifted up the poor girl’s skirt and began dragging Kevin’s shaking hand down the meat of her thighs.

Kevin couldn’t believe this was actually happening—that he was actually... violating someone, someone who probably didn’t even want to be here, didn’t want to be touched like this, didn’t want Kevin’s strange hands on her thighs.

“How do you feel, Kevin?” Dr. Nathan asked him after a while. “Do you feel anything down there?”

Kevin was surprised to find that, yes, he was feeling something down there. But he couldn’t understand why. He knew he wasn’t sexually attracted to this girl and even if he was, the situation was just too weird and awful to get turned on in. So why was he turned on? Then it clicked.

“Did you put something in my tea?” Kevin blurted out. “Like some kind of drug to make me...feel...like this?”

“I did.” Dr. Nathan replied honestly. “But don’t be upset. It’s just to aid your body into recognizing that it should be feeling this way when you see or touch an attractive woman, that’s all.”

Kevin was looking down in shame, away from Marjorie. He hadn’t had the courage to look into her eyes since they said hello. It was all just too awkward and horrible.

“Alright.” Dr. Nathan said as he released Kevin’s shaking hand from the girl’s lower half. “I’m going to leave you two alone for a little while, to get acquainted without me here to dampen the mood. I’ll be back in thirty minutes.” He glanced at Marjorie. “That should be plenty of time. Right, hun?”

She nodded in his direction, as though he’d given her some kind of task to carry out. Needless to say, she let out an exhausted sigh of relief the moment the man left the room.

About an hour and two drinks later, Chris and James had taken to the dance floor where they were slow-dancing to some Hawaiian ukulele music. Connor and Kevin were sitting alone together in a rather tacky-looking lounge booth shaped like a coconut, not really saying much of anything to each other.

“I came here to interact with actual people, Kevin.” Connor finally announced as he stood up with a sigh. “You don’t have to come with me, but I’m going up to the bar to get a drink. Want anything while I’m up there? More ginger ale? A diet coke?” He paused for a moment. “Some Prozac?”

Kevin just sneered at Connor’s quip and looked back down at the hem of his shirt. He’d managed to pull at it enough that the ends had become frayed with little tiny strings. He just wanted to go home. That was all he wanted. He didn’t belong here in a gay man’s palace of sin. He just wanted to be home, in his bed, with his little daughter sleeping safe and sound beside him. When he finally looked up, Connor was already back at the bar, waving down the bartender with a flirtatious hand wave.
“Hey there.” Came a man’s voice, awfully close to Kevin. Tearing his eyes away from Connor’s back, Kevin looked up to follow the voice and was startled when he found a strange man sitting down right next to him—close, too close—taking up the spot Connor had just vacated.

“Oh, look, I’m not—“, Kevin started, warily, before getting cut off.

“Your friend over there.” The man said, pointing to Connor, who was leaning over the bar chatting with the bartender. “He single or what?”

Kevin just stared at the man curiously for a moment, confused. “Excuse me?”

“I said is your friend single?” The man asked again, his voice slightly annoyed.

Kevin opened his mouth to speak—speak to answer this strange man’s question—to say that, yes, Connor McKinley was most definitely single. He was probably more single and available than any other guy in the place.

But something stopped him as he took a good, long look at the man. He didn’t look like Connor’s type at all. He was big and unkempt and smelled like whiskey and cheap cologne. His hair looked kind of matted down and sweaty. And as Kevin stared into the man’s eyes, he could see nothing at all in there but raw drunken lust. His whole demeanor just seemed very gruff and brutish. He tried to picture Connor with him for a split second and decided instantaneously that he didn’t like what he saw. Well, he didn’t like picturing Connor with any other man, but especially not this man.

“No, actually.” Kevin lied. “He’s, um, he’s not single. He’s taken, sorry.”

“Oh.” The man looked almost dumbfounded at this new information. “Well, is he faithful or does he—“, the man did a weird motion with his hand that Kevin didn’t recognize. “You know, fool around?”

“Oh, um…”, Kevin faltered for just a moment. “Yes—yes, of course he’s faithful. Very faithful, in fact. Why?”

Kevin watched as the man turned to gaze longingly back at Connor, his eyes immediately moving to zone in on Connor’s round bottom that was perfectly encased in his rather tight skinny jeans. “Mmmm, I don’t know, he sure looks like he fools around to me.” He turned back to Kevin, giving him a wink accompanied by a wide, toothy grin.

Now Kevin was positive that he hated this man and he certainly didn’t want him going anywhere near Connor McKinley.

“Well, he doesn’t.” Kevin replied, flatly. “Now if you could please leave me—“

“And how would you know?” The man scoffed. “You his boyfriend or something?”

“Maybe?” Kevin flustered, agitated now at both this annoying man and the fact that he had no idea how he’d even found himself in this situation in the first place. “Maybe I am. Why do you care?”

“Maybe you are?” The man asked disparagingly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Kevin watched as the man took a slow sip of his drink before turning around again to stare at Connor—well, more like stare at Connor’s ass. The redhead was now laughing melodically as he leaned up against the bar, one foot kicked back a little behind him, wiggling. Connor always wiggled his foot like that when he got happy or excited about something. Kevin could hear the music of his laughter from clear across the room. He felt a wave of something foreign, yet so familiar, wash over him—
some sort of deep-rooted desire to protect Connor from this sleazy man who only wanted to get into his pants.

“Whatever, I’m gonna go talk to him.” The man finally announced after Kevin took too long to answer. As the man moved to walk towards the bar, Kevin shot up out of his seat and roughly grabbed the man’s arm.

“No!” Kevin bellowed at the man, still gripping onto his arm. “I said he’s my boyfriend, didn’t I? My faithful boyfriend. Now get lost now or I’ll call the bouncer over.” He threatened rather hotly, not even sure why he was even doing this. Why was he doing this?

The man just gaped at him, clearly surprised at Kevin’s sudden burst of confidence.

“Did you hear what I just said?” Kevin snapped again. “Now get out of here!”

The man just snorted mockingly at Kevin’s threat, but ultimately decided to just gesture a cheers at Kevin with his drink before walking away, dejected.

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Kevin and Marjorie had been left alone in the room together. It was silent still, but now that Kevin’s hands were no longer on the girl's person, he used all the strength he had to nervously look back up and meet her eyes.

“So.” Marjorie said as she stood up and stepped closer to Kevin’s seat. “Do you need any, um,” she paused for a moment and pointed to the now-erect bulge in Kevin’s pants, “any help with that? That’s what he wants me to do for you, anyway.”

“No!” Kevin cried out in horror, covering up his bulge with his hands. “No, no, no. I don’t—I don’t want you to do... anything. I don’t know why you’re here or what you’re here to do but please know that I didn’t ask for any of this. I didn’t ask for this.” A sharp breath caught in Kevin’s throat, a few rogue tears spilling out of his eyes. He was gasping a little and was starting to have difficulty breathing. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all of this. I didn’t want to touch you. He made me touch you...he made me touch you...I didn't want to, he made me—”

“Kevin.” Marjorie said gently, reaching over to rest a hand on his knee. “Kevin, calm down. I know this isn’t your fault. Just try to relax, okay?”

Kevin tried to do as he was told and took in a long, deep breath. As he was exhaling slowly, he gazed in front of him at the girl, Marjorie. Her sweater had been cast aside and the blouse underneath it, ripped open. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Kevin could see her breasts. He didn’t want to see them, but they were right there. Why hadn't she buttoned it back up now that the man was gone? Why was she even doing this? Surely she couldn't have been that desperate for cash?

“Why are you here?” Kevin asked once his breath returned to almost normal. “Why—why would you ever agree to be a part of this?”

The girl thought for a moment as she looked closely at Kevin. “Why are you?”

“What? It's different for me.” Kevin said, shaking his head. “My parents—they’ll cut me off if I don’t keep coming here.” He paused for a moment and gazed deep into her eyes—her devastated green eyes. She pretended not to be, but he could see she wasn’t okay. She wasn’t okay at all. “But you—you don’t need to do this. You don't need to go through all of this. There are other options out there for you—there have to be.”
“You just met me, Kevin.” She reminded him, gently. “There's a lot you don't know about me.”

“Is it…is it money?” He asked. “Is that why you're doing this? Because if it is, I know a ton of places on campus you could work, at BYU. And I've, um, I've been saving up to go see my boyfriend in New York this Christmas but if you need the money more than I do, I could lend you some.”

“What makes you think I have a choice in any of this?” She asked, her tone a bit frustrated now. “I'm only here because of my parents too, you know. You're not the only one with shitty parents around here.”

Kevin's face fell at her words—her heartbreaking words. What kind of parents would do this to a young girl? To their own daughter? Monsters, he thought, angrily.

“Why would your parents send you here?” Kevin asked, appalled at whoever sent this poor girl here, to do these horrible things. He was so confused. “Are you...I mean, do you have, um, do you have gay thoughts too? Like me?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Then I don't understand.” Kevin whispered, his eyes crushed and desperate for answers. “Why are you here?”

“Because, Kevin,” she said with a sad sigh, “the doctor...he's my...he's my, um—”, She hesitated for a while before continuing on. “He's my father, Kevin.”

It felt as though a thousand tons of bricks suddenly thudded to Kevin's stomach.

“No...no, he can't be your father.” He stuttered, his eyes slammed shut in disbelief. “The way...the way he was touching you before...the terrible things he's doing to you...he can't be...he can't be your father. He just can't be...he wouldn't...he wouldn't touch you like that.”

“Well, he is.” She snapped, probably a bit harsher than intended. “And he does.” She added, her voice softened.

“Jesus Christ.” He moaned and buried his face into the palms of his hands. Somehow, his life just kept getting more and more complicated with each passing day.

“Are you over eighteen?” He finally asked after a long silence, lifting his face from his hands.

“Yeah, I just turned twenty.” She said. “Why?”

“Do you go to school?”

“I go to BYU.” She said with a sad smile. “But I kind of hate it.”

“So why don't you just apply somewhere else? You could transfer to another school, far away from here, far away from him.” Kevin said, his tone desperate and pleading. “You could go somewhere else, anywhere else. Anything would be better than this...than dealing with this. There has to be somewhere else you could go, some place where he couldn't...um, do—do those...do those...things to you.” He blushed, embarrassed at the fact that they were even having this awkward conversation in this strange, bizarre situation they’d both found themselves in.

“I could say the same to you, couldn’t I?” She asked, pointedly. “Why aren't you gone already? Why aren't you off in New York City with your boyfriend being happy and gay together instead of sitting here in this God forsaken hellhole talking to me?”
“Because,” Kevin whispered, shaking his head. He paused and ran a trembling hand through his once-perfect locks of hair. These days, he barely ever had the energy to style it like he used to. “It's…it's complicated.”

“Yeah.” She said, her voice distant and melancholy. “It is, isn't it?”

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Chris and James decided to head back to the hotel after another hour or so. They weren't used to staying out quite as late as Connor preferred to stay out. Kevin tried ardently to escape with them but Connor somehow convinced him not to go. It seemed that Connor still held some level of influence when it came to Kevin Price.

A little while later, Connor sauntered up to the bar where Kevin was now sitting, alone, staring glumly into his diet ginger ale.

“Pssst, Kevin.” The redhead tapped his friend’s shoulder. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Kevin looked up into Connor’s eyes. They looked positively delighted. Kevin just sighed. He didn’t much care why he looked so delighted.

“Only if the next few words out of your mouth are ‘call an Uber, it’s time to go home’.” Kevin replied dryly.

“Not quite.”

“Then what is it?” Kevin asked curiously.

He could see Connor had that smug look on his face again—the one he only had when he knew, or thought he knew, something that Kevin didn’t.

“Why do you have that look on your face?” Kevin asked, annoyed. He hated when Connor had that look on his face. It drove him bonkers.

“Kevin, have you been going around telling all the men in here that I’m taken?” Connor asked with a grin. Too big a grin for what Kevin knew was about to come flooding out of his mouth. “And that you’re my…”, he leaned in close to Kevin and lowered his voice, “boyfriend?”

“No!” Kevin shook his head manically. “No, no, it’s not—it’s not what you think.”

“Oh, it’s not?” Connor asked, amused, with that enormous grin still plastered on his face. “Because that seems to be the rumor going around. Apparently you spooked them all so much that everyone’s afraid to talk to me now.” He paused for a moment to let that sink in. “Is that true, Kevin?”

“No, no…”. Kevin’s face flushed immediately as he looked down at his lap in shame. “It’s not what you think, Connor.”

“Oh, it’s not? Well, why don’t you enlighten me, then? Because I sure as heck know what it looks like.” He grinned. “Are you sure you don’t have something to tell me, Kevin?”

“No! It’s just—“, Kevin flustered, his face red hot now. He looked back down to face his lap. “None of these guys in here are good enough for you, Connor. You know they’re not. They’re all just stupid and horny and young and just looking for their next good time. I just…I just didn’t like the
“Huh.” Connor mused, as if he didn’t already know exactly what Kevin had meant by that. “And how were they looking at me?”

“Like they were starving alley cats and you were a big, juicy steak.” Kevin deadpanned before taking a long, desperate sip of his ginger ale.

“How were they looking at me?” Connor hummed in consideration, a playful glint shining in his eyes. “And what’s so bad about that?”

Kevin scoffed as he slammed his glass down against the bar. “Please, Connor, they were all staring at you like you were some kind of sex object, like a piece of meat. Don’t tell me you actually enjoy being treated like that.” Kevin shook his head. “I thought you at least had some standards left. I must have been wrong.”

“You really have no sense of fun anymore, do you?” Connor sighed as he climbed onto the bar stool next to Kevin. “All that Mormonism just sucked it right out of you.”

Kevin just groaned.

“Look, Kevin, I’m not here to find Mr. Right or anything. All I wanted was to cut a little loose tonight and have some fun. And maybe get a little lucky.” He raised a hand to stop Kevin from interrupting. “But only if I so choose.”

“So you’d honestly consider sleeping with,” He looked around to find one of the many men he caught devouring Connor with their eyes earlier. Well, before Kevin set them straight, anyway. “That guy?”

He pointed to a tall, bronzed businessman type, who was grinding with some other guy on the dance floor, cupping the younger man’s butcheek with one hand and fist-pumping with the other.

“Oh, come on, what’s wrong with that guy?” Connor asked, eyes wide with surprise. “Of the selection tonight, which I will admit is pathetically bad, he’s one of the better ones, don’t you think?”

“No. No, I don’t.” Kevin insisted. “He’s clearly a douchebag, Connor. He’s one of those greedy, hungry, stockbroker types who’s never satisfied with anything and gets his rocks off on weekends splurging on drinks and charming naïve young men into his bed. How can you not see that?”

“I don’t know,” Connor shrugged, “he looks alright to me.”

Kevin felt as though he was on the verge of growling at Connor, but he just shook his head and tried to calm down.

“Fine, okay, whatever—what about that guy?” Kevin pointed to a rather large man in a striped suit who was ogling the men on the dance floor. “You can’t possibly sit there and tell me you’d actually go home with that man and let him touch you…let him …” He blushed pink and looked down again. “…well, you know.”

“Fuck me?”

“I hate that word, Connor.” Kevin snapped, still facing his lap. “You know I hate that word.”

“Fine, make love to me.” Connor said through a soft giggle. “I mean, I don’t know, it depends. How many free drinks has he bought me in this fake little scenario of yours?”
Flabbergasted now at how lightly Connor seemed to be taking this, Kevin started shaking his head in bewilderment.

“I can’t believe you! You’d seriously rather have sex with one of these sad, pathetic weirdos that you met in some cheesy gay bar in Orlando than—”, He stopped himself before he could say anything he’d later regret and shook his head. “You know what, never mind, Connor. I don’t care. Do whatever you want. It’s your body, right? And if you want to let total strangers use it and get off on it and have their way with you, then that’s just fine with me. I’m done talking about this. It’s your life.”

“No.” The redhead answered, softly—so, so softly that it would have caught Kevin off guard if he didn’t already know Connor McKinley inside and out. “I want to hear what you have to say, Kevin. Tell me, what kind of guy should I be with?” He gently pressed on, his eyes expectant, knowing. He leaned in closer to the other man, so much so that it was nearly making him uncomfortable. “Tell me. What kind of guy should I be with? What kind of guy can you honestly picture me with?”

“I don’t know!” Kevin shouted, exasperated at Connor’s stupid game. This was always Connor’s game. The game of trying to get Kevin to admit some kind of gay love confession. It was the only game they played these days. Kevin was already sorry he’d ever brought this up.

“I don’t—I don’t know, Connor.” He stammered, wanting desperately to end this conversation. “Let’s just drop it, alright?”

“Yes, you do.” Connor urged. “You do know. I know you do. And I want to know too. Please, enlighten me.”

The brunette sighed, looking back up into Connor’s beautiful, bright blue eyes that were piercing into him with a gaze so focused and intent, it was easy to forget they were still sitting in the middle of a loud, raucous tiki bar. It seemed as though Connor, too, no longer cared about where they were sitting. His focus was now entirely, solely, one-hundred percent on Kevin and only Kevin.

It was always only Kevin.

“Fine.” Kevin whispered before taking a moment to compose himself. “I think—I think you should be with someone who, um—”, he swallowed hard, trying hard not to stammer as he spoke, “…someone who was raised to be kind and respectful and sweet. Someone who thinks that having sex with another person should be special and meaningful and, um—and not something you just go ahead and do with any random stranger off the street.” He bit his lip as he gazed into Connor’s eyes, which had visibly softened now at Kevin’s admission. “You should be with someone who genuinely likes you for you, for who you are, Connor—for the person you really are deep down inside…not just for how great your ass looks in a pair of tight pants.”

“So you do admit it looks great then?” Connor beamed, his eyes twinkling like no tomorrow.

Kevin rolled his eyes, annoyed, but not without a hot blush briefly dusting his cheeks. “Forget it. Just…forget it. You clearly missed the entire point of what I just said.”

“No, I didn’t.” Connor whispered softly, gesturing for Kevin to continue. “Go on. I know there’s more.”

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Connor knew there was more—there was always more. So much more. Kevin honestly looked as though he could go on forever, but was stopping himself for some reason. And Connor knew the reason. Connor knew the exact reason. But he didn’t care. He just wanted to hear it. He wanted to finally hear the truth straight from Kevin’s own mouth.

“I—I don’t know.” The brunette shook his head. “Can we just—”

“Yes, you do.” Connor pressed. “I know you do. Tell me—what kind of man should I be with, Kevin?”

“Fine!” Kevin yelled. He took in a deep breath, probably to try and control himself. “I think…I think you should be with someone who likes taking you out on nice dates—to dinner and, um, and to the movies. And maybe he even pays for you once in a while, just because he feels like treating you sometimes, for no reason, even if it’s not Valentine’s Day or your birthday. Someone who likes surprising you with your favorite candy and those roses you love so much—the ones that aren’t really roses—the purple ones—I forget what they’re called.” He slammed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. “What are they called?”

“Tulips.” Connor offered with a sad smile.

“Tulips.” Kevin sniffled and opened his eyes again. They looked awfully bleary. “Right. Someone who brings you tulips out of the blue for no other reason except to show you how much he cares and he, um, he even buys you silly gifts from Five Below just to make you laugh.”

Connor felt a well of tears form behind his eyes at that. At one time, long ago, that had been his and Kevin’s special thing.

“Someone who, um—someone who laughs at your silly…no, your downright lame, jokes and teases you mercilessly whenever you accidentally eat your shrimp tails like you always do or whenever you get stupidly worried about something so unbelievably ridiculous that it’s borderline insane but he just wants to help and eventually he brings you down off that ledge and then you both just laugh about it later on because you really are so crazy sometimes that it’s funny.” Kevin paused a moment to wipe his eyes. “Someone who takes you to the movies and always lets you pick out the movie even though he feels like he might actually die if he has to sit through one more God awful romcom but he does it anyway because of you—because he loves you—and he always lets you eat most of his large popcorn even though eating movie popcorn is his absolute favorite part of going to the movies but, in that moment, he doesn’t really care because he just wants to see you happy.”

Connor could see tears starting to leak out of Kevin’s eyes as he watched the brunette bite down on his lip and face his lap.

Kevin hiccuped before going on. “Someone—one who would take the time to get to know you, to really get to know you.” Kevin finally added after a moment. “Someone who would take you out on proper dates and not even try to get into your pants until at least the third one, maybe even longer. Someone like—"

“Someone like you?” Connor finished for him in a voice so quiet, he wasn’t even sure Kevin would hear it.

A sharp breath hitched in Kevin’s throat. Shaking his head, he got up from his seat at the bar. He was trembling. Connor could see he was trembling now and there were a lot of unshed tears behind his eyes, threatening to slip out at any moment. Connor’s heart sank at the sight. He’d pushed Kevin too far and he knew it. He knew it.
“I’m done with this stupid game of yours, Connor. I’m done and I’m leaving.” Kevin whispered harshly under his breath. “I hope you have tons of fun fucking Mr. Douchebag over there with the bad sideburns and horrible taste in suits.”

“Kevin, wait!” Connor called after him, feeling terrible now at having pushed him too far. “Kevin, I’m sorry. Please, don’t go.”

He kept calling after Kevin, but the brunette just charged for the door, ignoring Connor’s pleas.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry…you don’t have to leave.” Connor begged as he chased after him. “Please—please don’t leave. Please. We can talk about this. We can talk about it. Please don’t—.”

Connor followed him to the door, stopping only when he saw Kevin turn around. Connor was not expecting to see a rainfall of tears running down Kevin’s face.

“Oh, no…no, Kevin….” The redhead murmured softly, stepping closer to him and trying to pull his friend into a hug, but Kevin just shoved him away with a hard push.

“Don’t touch me.” Kevin whispered hotly. “Don’t you ever touch me.”

Connor watched Kevin storm out the door, into the rain, leaving him behind—bleary-eyed, devastated, and, as always, alone.

Connor stayed at the bar for another couple of hours, despite the giant, gaping wound in his heart from upsetting Kevin. He was feeling numb and tipsy and sad and angry and in love with someone who was clearly buried underneath the deepest blanket of denial Connor had ever seen in his entire life. He honestly hadn’t meant to upset Kevin or make him cry like that. That was the complete opposite of what Connor wanted. All Connor wanted was to hear the truth come out of Kevin’s mouth and he thought that maybe he was finally coming close to hearing it—the words he so desperately ached to hear.

After downing another margarita rather quickly—too quickly—Connor wandered over to the dance floor where he would attempt to somehow salvage the rest of the evening. He just wanted to feel less numb inside, to forget all about what happened with Kevin and, instead, drown his sorrows in tequila and sweaty men and loud music. He’d never really learned any other way of coping with things like this and since he was already here anyway, at the gay bar, he thought he might as well just go with it.

After a while, he started dancing with the rather attractive man Kevin had dubbed “Mr. Douchebag” earlier in the evening. They danced together for a while, close and hot and sexy. They even grinded a little, the man murmuring sweet, drunken compliments into Connor’s ear all the while. The redhead honestly didn’t know if it was the hurt he felt or the sadness in his heart or all the tequila clouding his brain or the overwhelming feeling of fuck it, but he allowed himself to just fall into it and go with it and forget all about the pain for a little while.

So he went with it and he went with him and, at some point, he ended up back at the man’s apartment. It was close to one in the morning now and Connor was finally starting to sober up a little.

As they crashed through the apartment door, the man pushed Connor up against the wall in a flurry of passion, the redhead letting out a loud gasp at the ferocity in which the man was devouring him. As the man desperately sucked at his neck, Connor felt strong hands gripping and grabbing at his
bottom, giving it squeeze after squeeze.

Connor leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. He closed his eyes and allowed his mind to do what it always did in times like these—times when he desperately ached for closeness with another person but the only person in the entire world he truly wanted to be with didn’t want him back.

With his eyes now closed, he could imagine that the arms around him were Kevin’s—that Kevin was the one who was overcome with desire for Connor, that Kevin was the one who had decided enough was enough—that he was going to take Connor back, keep him all to himself, to Hell what anyone else might think. He imagined that the man’s lips were Kevin’s, that the hands were Kevin’s, that the hot breaths against his neck were Kevin’s…

But of course, in actuality, the man was absolutely nothing like Kevin.

He smelled much differently than Kevin. He didn’t smell familiar or safe or sweet and his breath didn’t have that faint scent of brewed coffee and chocolate that Kevin’s always had and his body just didn’t have that unique Kevin scent. Every person in the world had a unique smell to them and Connor knew Kevin’s oh so well. And the man touched differently too—as his hands weren’t nearly as gentle or careful or loving as Kevin’s. No, the man with his hands on Connor’s butt reeked of whiskey and sweat and other men who reeked of whiskey and sweat and other men. The man’s greedy hands were rough and desperate and callous and were absolutely nothing like Kevin’s.

But still, Connor tried. He tried with all of his might to allow his mind to drift away and imagine that all of this was happening with Kevin—with Kevin Price, the only man Connor had ever really loved.

“God, I can’t wait to fuck you.” Came a soft murmur, whispered into his ear. And it shook Connor out of his reverie faster than a lightning bolt because the man said something that Kevin Price would never say. Connor sighed rather sadly at the interruption of his imagined bliss, not even caring in the slightest that a long, tired sigh was the completely inappropriate response to *I can’t wait to fuck you.*

“What, you don’t want it now?” The man hummed into his neck, his tone sounding slightly annoyed now. “You were practically begging for it a second ago.” He grinned, bending down to give Connor’s ass another rough squeeze.

“No, I do.” Connor insisted, even though he only kind of meant it. “I want it.”

If this man fucked him then at least Connor could lay there in a kind of trance, with his eyes closed, and imagine that Kevin was the one thrusting into him, making love to him—and that was really all that mattered to Connor, in that moment.

The man led Connor into his bedroom and pushed him down on the bed. He tried to tease Connor by slowly undressing himself, giving the redhead a bit of a show, but Connor just sighed to himself again. This man was beyond arrogant and wealthy and full of himself. And not arrogant in the rather innocent, adorable way Kevin was arrogant. This man was arrogant the worst way possible.

The man hurriedly removed Connor’s clothing and after just a few minutes of mediocre foreplay, the man readied his lubed member in front of Connor, ready to push his way inside.

“Whoa, hold on!” Connor shouted, moving a hand down to protectively cover up his entrance to stop the man from pushing his way inside of him. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Like what?” The man asked innocently, advancing his way back towards Connor.
Connor's face turned hot and angry at that. “Um, I don't know...maybe a goddamn condom?” He shouted. That was when the redhead decided to move back a bit, away from the man. But as soon as he did, the man just attempted to pull him back into position.

“Stop it, I’m serious.” Connor snapped, angrily. “Put a condom on right now or I’m leaving.”

“No way, firecrotch.” The man murmured and grabbed onto Connor’s shoulders again, pushing him back down onto the bed beneath him.

Appalled and confused at what was happening, Connor wasn’t quite sure which offense he should be angrier about—the fact that this man just called him firecrotch or the fact that he was pinned down in a rather vulnerable position.

“I'm allergic to latex.” The man continued. “Besides, it feels so much better like this, trust me. Now let me in there, I haven't got all night.” The man insisted and advanced towards Connor again. Connor managed to wriggle out of his grasp a bit and scooted over as much as he could, away from the man.

“I'm not doing it without a condom.” Connor repeated, firmly. “Do you think I'm some kind of idiot?”

“Don’t worry, I’m clean.” The man said, softly, moving again towards Connor. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Considering I just met you? No. No, I don't trust you.” Connor spat and tried to get up off the bed, but the man just pushed him back down again. This time, the back of Connor’s head smacked rather hard against the headboard.

His eyes widened in shock as he gazed up at the man, a wave of real fear washing over him. He’d never been treated this badly by a man before in his entire life.

“This isn’t funny anymore, let me up.” Connor begged, a bit more timidly than before, as he tried to escape the bed. But the man just kept holding him down. “I'm not going to sleep with you, so just let me go now.” Connor whispered, blinking back a few rogue tears. “Let me go...”

But the man didn’t let up and just kept trying to force Connor’s body back into a position to have sex.

Upon realizing that this brute of a man was never going to let him go, Connor decided to give him a hard kick to the crotch, followed by a sharp bite right into his shoulder. The man yelped in pain as his hands fell from Connor’s shoulders in favor of clutching his wounded area, freeing the redhead from his grasp. Connor anxiously jumped out of the bed, grabbing his clothes off the floor, along with his cell phone, and cautiously backed away from the man.

“Touch me again and I'll call the police.” Connor said shakily, holding up his phone.

He managed to get out of the apartment without further incident or protest from the man. He hopped up and down in the apartment hallway, trying to pull up his pants as quickly as possible. He threw his shirt and shoes back on and ran out of the building as fast as he possibly could, tears streaming down his face.
When Connor finally got back to the hotel, it was nearly two in the morning. He desperately needed sleep, but he also needed to get the touch of that filthy man off of him.

Connor took in a deep breath and quietly opened the door to Kevin and Charlie’s room, so that he could use the shower. Without turning on the lights, he slipped inside quickly and made a beeline for the bathroom. He didn’t know if Kevin was awake or not, but even if he was, he probably wanted nothing to do with Connor at that moment anyway.

Connor took a long shower, probably thirty or forty minutes long. He used every soap and body wash he had available to try and get that man’s touch off of him. This was why he stopped having one night stands in the first place, he reminded himself. He didn’t even enjoy them. All they ever did was make him feel used and dirty and ashamed. And the man he had chosen that night, well, that horrible man wouldn’t have thought twice about forcing him to have sex without a condom…what a terrible, terrible decision, he thought to himself.

Connor felt tears well up in his eyes just thinking about it. He needed to be more careful from now on, he knew that, but he was just feeling so lost and lonely and hurt. He sometimes made poor decisions whenever he was feeling like that. He knew that was no excuse—it was no excuse—but it was still the raw, honest truth, nonetheless.

After his shower was over, he slipped on a pair of pajama shorts and a tee shirt and quietly left the bathroom. As he stood there, outside the bathroom, he took a few moments to just gaze at Kevin. The brunette was curled up in bed, facing away from Connor, with an arm wrapped around Charlie, who was snuggled close into his side.

Kevin looked to be asleep and most people would have assumed that he was, indeed, asleep. But Connor knew better. Kevin’s chest was heaving up and down just a little too fast and he couldn’t hear any of Kevin’s usual tiny snores.

Connor slowly walked towards the bed. If Kevin was awake, maybe he could apologize for his behavior, maybe they could make up and things could go back to normal again. He reached out and placed careful a hand on Kevin’s shoulder, making the other man instantly flinch.

“Sorry.” Connor whispered. “I—I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I’m trying to sleep.” Kevin said, quietly. “Please go away, Connor. We can talk about it tomorrow.”

“Oh, um, okay.” Connor said evenly, but in truth, his heart had sunk at the words. “I, um, I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am, Kevin. I’m so sorry for upsetting you tonight. I didn’t mean to. You—you have to believe me. I really didn’t mean to upset you like that. All I wanted was for you to have fun tonight and I blew it.” He paused for a moment and added sadly. “You were right when you told me that I’m not a very good friend.”

He expected Kevin to say something, anything, but he received nothing, not a word.

“Well, um, that’s all I wanted to say.” Connor whispered, followed by a sniffle. He reached down to give Kevin’s shoulder a gentle pat, even though he knew Kevin didn’t want him to. “I’m just…I’m just very, very sorry, okay?”

“Okay.” He heard Kevin whisper after a few moments, his tone sad and distant.

And his voice just sounded so unbelievably hurt that it made Connor’s adrenaline surge. He hadn’t meant to make Kevin feel like this. All he wanted was to hear was the truth. Despite wanting to stay by his side and make Kevin feel better and tell him that he’s sorry a million times over, he knew
Kevin didn’t want that. He knew Kevin just wanted Connor to leave him alone. So he did.

Connor turned around sullenly and started for the door, when he heard Kevin’s voice call out to him.

“Did you go home with him?” He heard Kevin ask, rather timidly. “With the man in the bad suit?”

Connor stopped in his tracks, immediately turning around to walk back towards Kevin. As he approached the bed, he could see Kevin squirming a bit, obviously feeling a little uncomfortable at even asking Connor that question.

"I did." Connor admitted, honestly, as he cautiously sat down on the bed near Kevin’s legs.

Connor could see the briefest wave of hurt and disappointment wash over Kevin’s face, making his heart sink a little. It appeared to be honesty hour, apparently, and he wanted to set things straight.

"But I didn’t sleep with him, Kevin." Connor whispered softly, reaching over to give the other man's leg a gentle squeeze. “I don’t know why, but I just thought you should know that.”

“Why not?” Kevin asked, quietly. “Why didn’t you sleep with him?”

Because of you, was what he wanted to say, because I love you.

But even Connor knew that statement was only partially true.

Not about the love part. He did love Kevin—very much so—even after all this time, but he would've went through with the one night stand anyway if the man had been even a half-decent person. If he had been, then Connor could've just laid there with his eyes closed, secretly imagining that the man pushing his way inside of him, thrusting and moaning, was Kevin—that Kevin was the one on top of him, making love to him, like he almost always imagined whenever he slept with anyone. It was his guilty secret, one that he never dared admit to anyone—not even to Chris.

"Well, he, um...he wasn't being very nice to me.” Connor admitted, quietly. “So, I just left. Nothing happened.”

Kevin didn't say anything for a few moments. He appeared to just be thinking over Connor's words. Eventually, he delicately untangled himself from his still-snoozing Charlie and rolled over onto his back so he was looking up at Connor.

"What do you mean, he wasn't being very nice to you?” Kevin asked in a rather protective tone of voice that made Connor smile a little. “What, um—what did he do? Did he hurt you?”

"Let's just say,” Connor sighed softly as he rested a hand over Kevin's, giving it a little squeeze, "he wasn't anything like you." His words made Kevin blush a little, making Connor want to just give in all the way. “You were right, Kevin.” He admitted. “About the guy, I mean. He was a real douchebag and I should've listened to you.” He said, mostly to himself. “I made a mistake.”

They were both quiet for a few moments.

"I'm sorry tonight didn't turn out the way you hoped it would.” Kevin eventually whispered with an amount of sincerity Connor didn't often hear from him. Well, at least not these days.

"I'm not.” Connor admitted honestly, giving Kevin's hand another gentle squeeze. “In fact, I think it turned out exactly the way it was supposed to.”

As Kevin gazed up at him, he looked as though he wanted to say more—so much more—about that,
but was holding back.

Finally, after a brief silence, the brunette flashed Connor a rather guilty half-smile. ‘I’m also, um—I’m also sorry for breaking our little ’no fighting in Disney World rule’.”

That one made Connor chuckle. A day hadn't gone by yet where they didn't fight over *something*.

“Honey, I hate to break it to you, but we've been breaking that rule ever since we got here.” Connor whispered, followed by soft laughter from both of them.

“Yeah, I guess we have.” Kevin agreed, a sad smile on his face.

They stayed there exactly like that, staring into one another's eyes for a while, neither of them quite sure why, but it wasn't all that uncomfortable. Just very quiet.

"I better get to bed." Connor finally whispered, breaking the silence as he stood up and moved for the door. "It's awfully late. Goodnight, Kevin. I'll see you in the morning."

“It is the morning.” Kevin reminded him.

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Connor said sadly as he turned to walk away.

“Connor.” Kevin called out again, in a whisper. “You don’t need to sleep on the couch. Just take the other bed, okay?”

“Are you sure?” Connor asked, biting his bottom lip pensively. “Because I really don’t mind sleeping out—“

“You don’t need to ask anymore.” Kevin whispered, his eyes warm and forgiving. “It's all yours, just take it.”

“Oh, um, thanks. Thanks a lot.” Connor said, meaning it. The offer of the bed was entirely unexpected, given what had happened between them that night. “Let me just get a glass of water and I’ll come back in and go to bed.”

When Connor returned with his water, he climbed into the bed across from Kevin. He turned onto his side, much like he always did, so his eyes were laid upon Kevin—Kevin with his arms wrapped protectively around Charlie. Kevin was still awake, too, and they both just laid there, simply gazing into one another’s eyes from across the room. It should have been awkward, it should have been beyond awkward and one of them should have looked away first, but they didn’t. They just continued to lay there for a long time, staring into each other’s eyes, until Connor’s eyes finally fell closed first and his mind slipped off to dreamland.
Two days later, Connor awoke in his bed around nine o’clock in the morning. He lazily stretched out his arms, humming all to himself with a content smile on his face. Much to his surprise, he wasn’t awoken by a child pouncing on his stomach or Kevin pulling his ass out of bed at a most ungodly hour to go to the park or people running around like nuts trying to spray each other with sunscreen or pack lunches or whatnot.

No, today they all got to sleep in a little. The plan was to just spend the entire day relaxing by the pool. As much as Connor loved going to the park with his friends, he was really looking forward to just taking it easy that day with a dip in the pool and maybe a frozen cocktail or two. Trying not to get too badly sunburned would be his only care in the world that day—and that sounded more than a-okay to Connor.

The redhead swung his legs over the side of the bed, yawning and stretching his arms above his head. Wiping the sleep from his eyes, he got up and headed straight for the bathroom to wash up and brush his teeth. The door was closed, but not locked, so he just went ahead and pushed it open without really giving it a second thought.
His eyes practically bulged out of his head though when he found himself staring (admittedly, through the rather hazy glass of the shower door) at the back of a very naked, very soapy, very attractive Kevin Price.

Letting out an audible gasp, he backed away from the sight before him, his body accidentally slamming into the wall behind him. It made a noise, but he hoped to God that by the time Kevin turned around to see what the ruckus was about, Connor would be long gone. In truth, he would have given anything to be able to stay right there, gazing longingly at the sight before him, watching as soapy suds slid down the curve of Kevin’s spine, over the round bump of his bottom before finally running down the meat of his tanned, muscular thighs.

But, he couldn’t. Of course he couldn’t. He had to get the Hell out of there—now—before Kevin inevitably turned around and had a heart attack.

Once he was out of the bathroom, the door safely closed behind him, Connor slammed his eyes shut and leaned back against the door with a long, painful groan.

Wet Kevin.

Soapy Kevin.

Naked Kevin.

Great. Now that would be all he’d be able to think about for the rest of the goddamn day—day, week, month…year.

Sigh.

He then felt the door being pushed opened from behind him, causing him to stumble forward. Once he caught himself and turned back around to face the perpetrator, there stood Kevin Price—a very confused, angry-faced Kevin Price. He was dripping wet from head to toe, a big mountain of suds sitting comically atop his head, but at least now he was clad in a rather modest-looking bathrobe. Connor took note of the cheesy Lion King pattern adorning the bathrobe, making a tiny, involuntary smile creep onto his face.

“What the Hell was that about?” Kevin demanded. “You walked in on me!”

“You didn’t lock the door!” Connor defended with narrowed eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. He hadn't purposely violated Kevin’s privacy. Sure, he may have thoroughly enjoyed seeing a butt-naked Kevin Price, all soapy and wet and…oh, God…and so what if it may have titillated his senses just a little? Well, maybe more than a little. Okay, so maybe it was more like a lot, but it sure as heck wasn’t intentional and he disliked the accusation.

“How was I supposed to know you were in there?” Connor asked, annoyed. “I'm not a mind reader, you know.”

“So the running water didn’t give you a clue?”

“I wasn’t paying that much attention, okay?” Connor sighed. “I’m feeling a little sleepy this morning.”

“Hungover again, are we?”

“No.” Connor said, rather defensively. “You know how I am when I first wake up, I’m always half-
dead until I’ve had my coffee. You know that.”

With that logic, Kevin seemed to accept Connor’s reasoning for barging in on him, albeit begrudgingly. Connor knew that Kevin, too, needed his coffee in the morning in order to feel even semi-human.

“I’m just not used to locking the door anymore, that’s all. At home, it’s just me and Charlie.” Kevin said, quietly. “But you still could’ve knocked, you know.”

Connor watched the other man pull nervously at his bathrobe, closing it more tightly around him.

“You’re right.” He said, giving Kevin a small, forgiving smile. “I’m sorry for not knocking, okay? I’ll be more careful next time.”

He watched the brunette shift awkwardly on his feet for a moment before speaking again.

“Did you, um…did you see anything?” Kevin shyly asked, looking away from Connor's gaze.

Connor smirked at that and stepped closer to Kevin, purposefully invading his personal space. Kevin Price certainly was cute whenever he got all shy and embarrassed like that—much too cute.

“Hm. Nothing I haven’t seen before.” Connor teased with a wink, flirtatiously trailing a finger down the lip of Kevin’s bathrobe collar, ‘accidentally’ brushing up against his chest hair, just to make him blush.

And blush he did. As the warm pink hue filled his cheeks, Kevin stumbled back a bit, embarrassed. Regaining his composure, he stomped away from Connor, in favor of digging through his dresser drawer. Once he finally found the clothing items he was looking for, he turned back around only to find Connor still standing there, watching him.

“What, the shower peep wasn’t enough for you?” Kevin snapped, his cheeks still burnt pink with embarrassment. “You wanna watch me get dressed too?”

Yes, Connor thought to himself. Yes, I do.

Outwardly though, he just rolled his eyes and started for the door. Before leaving, however, he turned back around to face Kevin.

“Oh, and just in case you were wondering…” Connor started, airily, with a mischievous grin on his face.

Kevin just furrowed his brow in that rather adorable way he always did. “Yes?”

Connor twitched his lips, trying to hide the gigantic grin threatening to overtake his face.

“You still look damn good in the nude, Kevin Price.” He confessed rather giddily as he charged for the door.

“Connor!” Kevin screeched, his cheeks blooming an even brighter crimson at the flirty compliment. He took a few steps back from Connor, looking nothing short of scandalized.

“What?” Connor asked, innocently. “I’m just telling the truth.”

“Well…stop it, okay?” Kevin demanded, clearly all flustered now. Connor watched as he tightened his grip on the ball of clothes in his arms.
“The Kevin Price I used to know would have never shied away from such high praise.” Connor said. “And especially not from me. But then again, his head was a lot bigger than yours, wasn’t it?”

“Will you please just get out of here already?” Kevin begged pathetically. He was protectively covering up his bare chest with the ball of rumpled clothing in his arms, holding onto it for dear life. It was rather adorable, Connor thought. Sad, yes, but adorable nonetheless.

“I’m leaving, I’m leaving.” Connor said, holding up his hands in surrender. “But you might want to take a look in the mirror before you put those clothes on.”

“Well?” He asked before taking a quick look in the mirror. “Oh.” He said quietly as he ran a hand over the pile of suds sitting atop his head.

Connor just shook his head with a quiet giggle as he closed the door behind him, leaving behind a probably very confused, very embarrassed, very beet red Kevin Price.

A little while later, around ten o’clock in the morning, the group was all hanging out near the hotel pool, enjoying a relaxing day of respite from the hustle and bustle of the parks. Charlie was sitting with Connor on the edge of the kiddie pool, Connor with his feet dipped lazily into the shallow water and Charlie sitting on her butt by his feet, happily splashing around.

“Hey.” Connor overheard a voice call out from behind him.

When he turned around, he saw Kevin and Arnold racing towards him, shit-eating grins on both their faces.

“Well, that can’t be good, he thought to himself.

“What are you guys up to?” Connor asked, suspiciously.

Whatever was making them grin stupidly like that had to warrant at least some suspicion.

“Nothing…we’re just about to have an epic skee ball battle is all!” Arnold announced in that excited, childlike way he had about him. “Did you know Kevin was on the skee ball team in high school? I literally found this out just now!”

“No, he never mentioned it. That, or I blocked it out.” Connor raised an eyebrow at Kevin, a bemused half-smile on his face at this new information. “Your high school had a skee ball team?”

“We sure did.” Kevin grinned, proudly. “And yours truly was the captain for two years in a row, thank you very much.”

Connor let out a tiny snort at that. “Hey, remember that lovely compliment I paid you earlier?”

“Yes.” Kevin said in an unsure tone, looking rather uncomfortable at the reminder.

“Yeah, I’m totally taking that back.”

Kevin scoffed, not without turning a bit pink in the cheeks. “Well, you’re one to talk, mister captain of the unofficial Scrabble Club.”
“Unofficial?” Arnold raised an eyebrow. "Why was it unofficial?"

“He couldn’t get enough people to join.” Kevin said, looking haughty and rather amused. “Towards the end it was just him and two girls who only joined because they had crushes on him.”

“It happens to take a lot of brainpower to be good at Scrabble, you know.” Connor said. “What skills do you need for skee ball, huh? Enough dollars for the change machine?”

“A good eye.” Kevin said, doing a silly motion with his hand to demonstrate.

“And a strong throwing arm!” Arnold chimed in.

“Oh and a good hand grip.” Kevin said, balling his fist and curling up his fingers to demonstrate.

“And, yeah, enough cash to last at least an hour, I guess.” Arnold admitted, to which Kevin nodded in agreement.

“I don’t know why, but all of that just sounded…so, so dirty.” Connor said, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

“Skee ball happens to be a legitimate sport, Connor.” Kevin rolled his eyes before flashing that big, beautiful smile of his, the one Connor hadn't seen in far too long. “If it wasn’t, they wouldn’t play it in the Olympics.”

“They don’t play skee ball in the Olympics, you big dummy.” Connor said, trying to hide his amused grin.

“They don’t?” Kevin asked, seemingly confused. He nudged Arnold in the gut. “You told me they play it in the Olympics!”

Connor watched on as the two best friends bickered for a solid minute over the athletic validity of skee ball. God, they were such dorks—his dorks—and Connor loved them for it.

“Okay, anyway,” Kevin said with a sigh as he finally turned back to Connor, “I came over to ask if you could watch Charlie for a bit while we play? I promise it won’t take more than, like, thirty minutes tops. I would ask Naba but Harry doesn’t really like the water and she just looks so happy playing over here with you.”

Connor just beamed at the two goons who looked way too excited for two grown adults who were about to have an epic skee ball battle.

“You dorks go play,” Connor insisted, “Charlie and I will hang out here in the kiddie pool like a couple of mature adults.” He glanced down at Charlie. “Right, sweetie?”

“Right!” She cried out before falling back and splashing into the water.

“Thanks.” Kevin said with a genuine smile. “I owe you one.”

Connor was about to respond to tell him that, no, he didn’t owe him anything, but it was too late—Arnold was already dragging Kevin off in the direction of the arcade.

Connor just shook his head at the pair as he watched them run off. He was more than content to spend what would inevitably be the next hour or so playing with Charlie in the kiddie pool. It was still morning and most of the families were out at the parks, so they had the little pool all to themselves. The sun was shining brightly in the sky, but it wasn’t beating down on Connor’s pale
skin too harshly. Ever since he and Kevin had made up the other night after their rather ugly fight at the gay bar, things have been going pretty smoothly between them—well, as smoothly as they could possibly go, anyway, given the circumstances.

Everything just felt really...good.

“Watch me, Uncle Connor! Watch me!” Charlie shouted from her perch atop one of the little pool slides. “Are you watching?”

“I’m watching.”

“Weeeee!” The little girl cried out as she slid down the slide, her butt landing into the foot of water with a splash.

“Did you see me?” She asked excitedly as she ran right back up to the top of the slide to go down again.

“I sure did!”

Connor found himself grinning like no tomorrow as he watched Charlie play in the pool. He’d never really been around children all that much, save for the little dance classes he used to teach at the village school, back in Uganda. He didn't have any siblings nor did he have too many cousins. The ones he did have, he wasn’t very close to. Most of his friends in New York were childless.

But being with Charlie felt so nice, in a familiar, yet completely unfamiliar, way. She sure had a knack for making little bubbles of warmth well up in his chest and his mouth stretch from ear to ear in a giant, stupid grin. And the fact that she looked so much like Kevin—well, that was just the icing on the cake.

Connor glanced over at the adult pool where James and Chris had just jumped in, making two huge splashes. Nobody else seemed to be around so they had the big pool all to themselves. Connor’s lips curled up into a soft smile as he watched his two friends embrace tightly in the water, holding each other close. James was planting tiny little kisses to Chris's nose, much as he always did, making the blonder man blush. James, being the slightly larger one of the pair, picked Chris up and tossed him playfully into the water. Chris tried to get back at him by leaping onto his partner’s back and pushing him down into the water, but James just lunged backwards, causing them to both fall over into the water. By the time they came back up, they were both kissing each other through gasps of air.

Connor was beyond happy for his two friends, both of whom he knew were very much in love. They'd had some issues in the past though, mostly with James’s family being unaccepting of their relationship. Eventually, James had to remove them from his life in order to live an honest, happy life with Chris. But at least they had Chris’s family. They were much more accepting of their relationship and the pair spent nearly every holiday with the Thomases. Connor knew it helped to fill at least some of the hole in James’s heart from losing his own family. All in all, they were quite happy. Lately, they’d even been talking about adopting a child together.

And Connor was happy for them. He truly was. And yet, still, some part of him couldn’t help but think about himself and Kevin, think about what they’d once had and what they’d lost—it was something Connor honestly believed he’d never find with anyone else ever again.

“Uncle Connor?” Came a tiny voice from behind him, pulling him from his wandering thoughts. “Why do they do that?” The voice asked, curiously.

Connor turned back around to find Charlie sitting in the water by his feet. She crawled closer and
leaned her little body up against his leg, where she proceeded to wrap her arms around it, hugging it. Connor followed her gaze to find that she, too, was looking at his two friends in the pool, kissing.

“You mean Chris and James?” Connor asked, sweetly, as he reached down to card a gentle hand through Charlie’s wet, untamed curls.

Charlie nodded as she continued to gaze at the two men, kissing each other in the pool. Her brow was furrowed as though she were in deep concentration about something. She somehow managed to look even more like Kevin whenever she did that. It did weird, sappy things to Connor’s heart, whenever she did that, so he tried his best not to think about it.

“Well, they love each other, sweetheart.” Connor explained simply, giving her hair a playful tousle. “That’s why they kiss like that. Adults do that sometimes when they’re in love. Or even when they’re not. I know it looks kinda gross, but trust me, it’s actually really pleasant.” He smiled at the little girl. “You’ll understand when you’re older.” He added with a wink.

“I don’t think so.” Charlie scrunched up her nose at the idea of kissing, making Connor stifle a laugh. She smiled too and crawled up onto Connor’s lap, wrapping her little arms around his neck. Connor instinctively wrapped his arms around her as well, so she wouldn’t fall off. He gave her tiny body a gentle squeeze as he glanced back at Chris and James.

“I know it seems super weird right now, but trust me, you’ll get it when you’re older, I promise.”

“God doesn’t like it when boys do that together.” Charlie said simply, unfazed, as she continued to stare at the two men in the pool. “Boys who do that together go to the bad place when they die.”

Connor could practically feel his heart stop at the sound of Charlie’s words. It took his brain a few moments to even register what the child had just said.

*God doesn’t like it when boys do that together.

Boys who do that together go to the bad place when they die.*

Once he was finally able to get a grip on his bearings, he let his mind silently reel for a moment before saying anything to the little girl. He didn’t want to say the wrong thing, that was for sure. Saying the wrong thing could have terrible consequences for him and Kevin and they’d only just started being semi-friends again.

He knew Kevin had a whole host of issues with his sexuality—that much was abundantly clear. He knew his ex-boyfriend was still denying it, holding it down, pushing it out and turning it off. But would Kevin have actually gone so far as to teach his daughter to be homophobic? To teach her that God condemned gay people? That acting on gay feelings would send them all to eternal damnation in Hell?

No…no. Kevin would never do that. No matter how much self-hatred he may have had inside of him, for himself, he would never pass that kind of hate onto a child—onto his child. He wouldn’t—he just wouldn’t. Connor knew he wouldn’t. He was still Kevin, after all, and Kevin was a good person. Connor knew him well enough to know he’d never teach Charlie to hate, no matter how screwed up his brain might have been.

And yet, still, Connor needed to be absolutely certain. There was some small, nagging, buried part of his brain that just wouldn’t let it go until he was one-hundred percent sure.

“Who told you that, sweetie?” He finally managed to choke out. “That God doesn’t like it when
boys do that together?”

His question came out sounding a whole lot sadder and more heartbroken than he’d intended, but he found he simply couldn’t help it. There was just something so tragic about kids repeating learned ignorance from adults. And he knew an adult had to be the one filling her brain with that kind of propaganda—kids were never naturally inclined to feel that way about anyone, to hold such limited viewpoints. It was always ingrained into them by some backwards adult.

The little girl stayed quiet for a moment, so Connor tried again.

“It’s okay, sweetie, you can tell me.” He assured. “Was it your dad? Did your daddy tell you that?”

Charlie shook her head as she continued to gaze at the kissing couple in the pool. “No.”

Connor heard himself audibly sigh in relief at that. But if it wasn’t Kevin, then who was it?

“Alright.” Connor said evenly, trying not to give away his point of view to the girl. “So, who told you that, honey?” He asked again, playfully bouncing the girl up and down on his knee with a forced smile to try and indicate that he wasn’t upset with her.

“My grandma.” Charlie finally admitted. “She says God doesn’t like it when boys kiss each other like that.” She explained as she tucked her head deep into Connor’s neck, seemingly in some kind of shame. “Grandma says boys should be with girls because that’s what God wants.”

Connor let out a long, tired exhale at that. For once, in his entire twenty-eight years of life, he was at a total loss for words.

His first instinct was to go off about how hateful and ignorant her grandmother was—and Connor certainly knew the little girl’s grandmother was—and Connor certainly knew the little girl’s grandmother, alright. He had known it was Kevin’s mother the moment the word “grandma” left her mouth. It was most certainly Kevin’s mother who was telling her those things. It had to be. Connor could remember clear as day how Kevin’s mother had treated him after he’d come out. His father, too. The way they looked at him, with disgust, and judged him and tried so hard to change him. All of it made Connor feel sick to his stomach. And the fact that they were trying to poison Charlie's mind with the same kind of backwards ideology made Connor feel even sicker.

He wanted to hold Kevin’s little girl and explain to her that it wasn’t a sin for boys to like boys, that her grandmother was just blinded by the Church’s teachings, that she was misguided, that the beautiful love between two people—any two people—could never be wrong or sinful. He wanted to tell her that being gay or straight or bi or anything, for that matter—simply wasn’t a choice. He wanted to tell her that if there was a God, then everyone must have been built exactly how he created them to be. And that was okay. Being gay was okay.

But, he couldn’t say any of that to the little girl. He knew he couldn’t.

This was a child he was dealing with here—a small child who had only just turned five. Kevin’s child. He needed to tread carefully—very carefully. He wanted to come out of this mess alive, with Charlie more enlightened and his rocky semi-friendship with Kevin, which was being held together by the feebleness of a tiny string, to somehow remain in-tact.

For the young redhead who hadn’t had much experience with children, this would be a task easier said than done.

“Well,” Connor started out gently as he brought Charlie’s face out from his neck, “James and Chris kiss like that because they love each other, Charlie.” He explained softly. “And…well, I don’t think
love could ever really be a bad thing, do you?” He tried his hardest to smile, so that she would smile too. “Love is such a beautiful, amazing thing, sweetheart. It could never be ‘bad’. And if there is a God, I think he would want us to experience as much love as humanly possible.” He paused for moment. “Don’t you?”

As Connor looked into her eyes, he could tell she was feeling conflicted—conflicted between what Connor was saying, which he hoped was making sense, and what her grandmother had once told her.

“But—but Grandma says it doesn’t matter how much you love each other,” Charlie said, puckering her lips out, “it’s still bad for two boys to kiss like that because it makes God very mad.”

“Okay.” Connor nodded as he thought over his next move to try and explain this to a five-year-old. How could he possibly explain this to a five-year-old?

“Okay, I have an idea.” He said with a grin. “I'm going to give you an analogy, okay?”

“What’s an—an—algy?” Charlie asked innocently, mispronouncing the new word as kids often did. She hopped down off Connor’s lap in favor of going back to playing in the water down by his feet.

“Oh, um, okay…well…an analogy is when you try to explain one thing by using another thing as an example.” He explained in simple terms he hoped she’d comprehend. “So, um…okay, I got it. What’s your absolute favorite flavor of ice cream in the whole wide world?”

“Chocolate!” Charlie cried out excitedly, jumping up and down in place, making Connor giggle a bit. “Chocolate, chocolate, chocolate!”

“Ah, another chocolate lover.” Connor beamed. “Just like your dad.” He gave her a little poke in the belly, making her giggle too.

“Me and Daddy love chocolate!” Charlie cried out happily. “Are we getting ice cream now?”

“Oh, uh, no, sweetie. Maybe later we’ll get some ice cream, okay? This is all part of the analogy “, Connor tried to explain, “remember?”

“Oh.” She said glumly. “Okay.”

He had no idea if any of this was even going to make sense to her, but he’d be damned if he wasn’t going to try.

“Okay, so chocolate is your favorite ice cream flavor in the whole wide world.” Connor went on. “Now what’s your least favorite flavor?”

The little girl thought about it for a second before scrunching up her nose. “Strawberry!”

“Okay, so you love chocolate ice cream and you aren’t crazy about strawberry. You eat chocolate ice cream all the time and it doesn’t feel wrong because it tastes yummy and you love it and everything is happy and fine and dandy.”

“Yeah!”

“But now let’s say, um…let's say some people come along and they tell you that they think it’s actually really bad to like chocolate ice cream and that people who eat it are sinning. These people think that everyone should be eating strawberry ice cream instead because that’s what God wants.”
“Why would they do that?” Charlie asked, horrified, as though the very idea of being against chocolate ice cream was the most batshit insane idea in the world. “Chocolate’s the best ever!”

“Because they’re convinced that God doesn’t like it when people eat chocolate ice cream. They think people should be eating strawberry instead.” Connor said, slowly. “Are you following me?”

Charlie nodded.

“Good.” He said, smiling. “Now, they tell you it’s not a sin to simply like chocolate as long as you promise never to eat it ever again. Instead, you have to eat strawberry ice cream, even though what you really want is chocolate.”

Charlie thought for a long moment before puckering her lips. “But I don’t like strawberry!”

“Right, but remember, the people are all telling you that God doesn’t want you to eat chocolate ice cream. God wants you to eat strawberry.” Connor reminded her pointedly. “They even say that if you eat chocolate, you’re going to go to the bad place after you die.”

“No!” She cried out. “I don’t wanna go to the bad place!”

“Shhh, shhh, don’t worry.” Connor cooed with a smile. “It’s only an analogy, remember? It’s not real, sweetheart.”

“Oh, right.” She sighed in relief.

“Okay.” Connor smiled. “Now even though all of these people are saying that eating chocolate ice cream is bad, what would you think, Charlie? Would you think it was bad?”

Charlie thought hard for a moment before shaking her head. “No!”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not bad.” She shrugged. “It doesn’t hurt anyone. It’s just yummy!”

“Exactly.” Connor smiled broadly at that. “And would eating strawberry make you love chocolate any less? Even if you could never, ever eat it again as long as you lived?”

Charlie shook her head again. “No.”

“So even if you vowed to spend your entire life eating strawberry instead of chocolate and it made you absolutely miserable, you’d still love chocolate, deep down, wouldn’t you? Because that’s just the way you are, the way God made you. Eating strawberry could never change that.”

Charlie nodded, but then after thinking about it for a moment, she shook her head again. “But God wouldn’t say not to eat chocolate ice cream.”

“Why not?”

“Cause God has better things to do than care about ice cream.” She said with a shrug, making Connor let out a giggle.

“I don’t think God would say that either.” Connor admitted, giving Charlie a playful wink. “After all, if God made everything on the whole entire Earth, down to the tiniest little bug and up to the tallest trees, then he must have made chocolate too, right? As well as all the chocolate lovers of the world.”

“Yeah!” Charlie cried. “That means chocolate can’t be bad! Not if God made it.”
“Exactly.” Connor said, visibly relieved.

He took a moment to gaze into Charlie’s wide green eyes. He knew he was finally getting through to her, changing her mind—and that felt really good.

“So, you see, as much as your Grandma doesn’t understand it...Chris and James can’t help but love each other, Charlie. It would be like telling someone who loves chocolate ice cream that they need to eat strawberry instead. No matter what anybody says, they can’t change who they really are. Some people like chocolate. Some like strawberry. Some people like strawberry and chocolate. That’s just the way they were made. Everyone’s different and that’s okay. People should be able to love whoever they want to love. The only thing that matters is that the love is real and from the heart.” Connor reached out and placed a hand over the little girl’s heart. “And do you know what would happen if Chris and James gave in and stopped being together, just because people told them they shouldn’t be?”

Charlie shook her head.

“They’d be very sad, Charlie.” Connor said softly, reaching up to card a hand through the little girl’s hair. “They’d be miserable and sad their whole lives just because some people don’t agree with the flavor they like—just like making someone who likes chocolate ice cream eat strawberry instead.” He smiled and ruffled her hair a little, brushing his hand against her rosy little cheek. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Charlie thought about what Connor said for a moment but then shook her head. “But my Grandma says boys who do that with other boys will go to the bad place when they die!”

“But what do you think?” Connor asked desperately, hoping the little girl would be strong enough to come to her own conclusion on the matter. “Do you think it’s wrong? Look at them, Charlie.” He pointed to the two men in the pool, who were no longer kissing, but were just laughing and twirling around in the water. “Really look at them. Are they doing something bad? Is laughing and kissing and loving each other bad?”

“No.” Charlie replied honestly, much to Connor’s relief. “But Grandma says boys who like boys can be fixed to like girls, so it can’t be like chocolate! They can be fixed to be what God wants!”

“That is not true, Charlie.” Connor whispered, his heart feeling as though it’s been broken, beaten, stabbed at a thousand times. All he wanted was to get through to this little girl—to Kevin’s little girl.

Charlie began to pout. “But Grandma says—”

“Look, honey, I know you trust your Grandma. I know she loves you and that you love her too. And I know she wouldn’t lie to you...in fact, I’m sure she believed every word of it, but that is not true, Charlie. Boys who like boys can’t be magically changed to like girls and that’s okay.” He paused for a moment and decided to go back to the ice cream analogy. “Just like someone who likes chocolate can’t be changed into someone who likes strawberry. And that’s okay.” He took a moment to let that sink in. “Do you understand what I’m trying to say, Charlie?”

He watched her concentrate for a little while, thinking really hard about his words. Finally, she nodded.

“Good.” Connor sighed with relief.

He was all too glad for that conversation to finally be over with. Now, he could get back to enjoying a relaxing day by the pool, soaking up whatever amount of sun his pasty white skin could tolerate
and maybe even enjoy some pina coladas later with Chris.

_Everything’s fine_, Connor thought to himself, trying to shake the unpleasantness of the conversation off of him. _It’s all just fine._

Only, it wasn’t.

“But what about my daddy?” Charlie eventually asked, after a few moments, clearly still confused about something. Her words, once again, ripped Connor from his internal reverie faster than the snap of a twig.

“What?” Connor asked, confused. “What about your daddy?”

“Grandma says my daddy used to like boys.” Charlie stated matter-of-factly, splashing the water happily with her hands. “But then the men at school fixed him so he wouldn’t like boys anymore. Grandma says he’s all better now. He doesn’t like boys anymore.”

Connor’s eyes widened in shock, his stomach instantly twisting in on itself, souring at the little girl’s words. This wasn’t good. This wasn’t good at all.

“What—um, what did you just say?” He asked, softly, hoping to God he’d just misheard her words. Maybe he’d just misheard her words.

“The men at school fixed my daddy so he wouldn’t like boys anymore.” She repeated innocently, causing Connor’s heart to instantly sink. He hadn’t misheard her words. He’d heard them loud and clear. “He used to like boys, but now he likes girls because that’s what God wants. My daddy always does what God wants.”

Connor’s stunned silence seemed to concern the little girl and her brow creased in worry over her distraught guardian.

“Are you okay, Uncle Connor?” She asked, worriedly, reaching out to touch his leg.

“Can you—“, Connor started before choking on what were most likely unshed tears. He could feel his body starting to turn on him, but he needed to get more information on the matter before that happened. “Can you…can you tell me more about what your grandma said? About your daddy?”

Charlie nodded, a big smile back on her face. “Grandma says there was a bad Connor on my daddy’s church mission. He made my daddy do bad things with boys. Really bad things. Things that made God very mad. But then the men at school fixed him, so he’s all better now.”

“The bad—the bad Connor.” Connor stammered through the thickness that had clogged up his throat and rendered him unable to speak properly. “He made your daddy do bad things with boys and then the men at school…fixed him.”

Charlie’s eyes suddenly widened as though she’d just realized something very important.

“Oh, no…not you, Uncle Connor!” She tried to clarify with urgency. “I’m talking about the bad Connor, the one who made my daddy like boys in the way you’re not supposed to like boys. But then they fixed my daddy so he wouldn’t like boys anymore. Now he’s all better!” She exclaimed happily. “I’m really happy my daddy’s all better, aren’t you?”

Connor was silent for a long time. He was simply…stunned.

And that didn’t often happen to Connor. He normally had something to say in every situation,
regardless of what it was, always ready with a quip or a comment or a shrug or anything. But not this time. This time, he had absolutely no idea what to say. He tried to speak, but found nothing would come out. He didn’t know what he could possibly say to the very confused little girl standing in front of him, uttering somebody else’s words of God and homophobia and Hell and Kevin...Kevin, but he did know he had to get out of there as soon as possible. His body was starting to betray him—making him tremble, making him feel as though he might break out crying. And he would break out crying. Any minute now, he would. He could feel it, the threat of hot tears boiling behind his eyes and he knew they wouldn’t stay back there for long. No, they would come bursting out of him at any moment, scaring Charlie, scaring himself. He knew that, but he couldn’t let that happen. Not here, not in the middle of a kiddie pool, and certainly not in front of Charlie.

Connor felt Kevin’s little one giving him a soft pat on the knee to try and make him feel better, but all it did was make the tears behind his eyes more angry, more urgent to escape.

All of this was wrong. It was so, so wrong. The little girl in front of him thought everything was good, that everything was as it should be, that her daddy was all better, all fixed up—that he wouldn’t be going to the bad place anymore.

But Connor knew the truth—that nothing was as it should be. Not at all. And it made him feel absolutely sick. Everything about this new information made him feel as though he might vomit. Any minute now, he was sure he’d vomit—cry and vomit and who knows what else.

He had to leave—now.

“Why do you look so sad, Uncle Connor?” She asked, her lips pouty in that way she had about her whenever she felt sad. She appeared to be totally confused by Connor’s reaction to this information about her daddy. She thought it should make Connor happy. The little girl simply didn’t know any better.

And that just about broke Connor’s heart.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie.” Connor whispered hoarsely as he stood up, trembling a little bit. “But I—I have to go now.”

Through the blurriness of his vision, he immediately scanned the area for any sign of someone in their group who could take over watching Charlie while he went and inevitably cried his eyes out, preferably somewhere isolated.

When he caught the sight of Naba helping Harrison onto a swing over by the little playground, he picked Charlie up in haste and ran over to them. The normally-cheerful woman’s face fell the moment she got a good look at Connor. She repeatedly asked him what was wrong as she took a highly confused Charlie from his arms.

“What’s wrong?” She demanded, her chocolate brown eyes big and concerned.

“I’m fine, really.” Connor lied to Naba with a smile so forced he was certain he probably looked like a crazy person. “I just don’t feel well all of a sudden and I just—I really have to go.”

He took a moment to meet Charlie’s eyes. She looked so stricken, heartbroken, that her fun Uncle Connor had suddenly deposited her with Naba, seemingly telling her that he didn’t want to play with her in the pool anymore.

“I’m sorry, sweetie.” He whispered sadly. “I’ll be back later, okay?” He added to try and make her feel a little better, but he could see her lips puckering out sadly nonetheless. “Maybe we’ll go get
some ice cream together later, when I feel a little better. How does that sound?”

She nodded sadly and watched as Connor turned around and ran.

He just ran.

He ran fast and desperate and aimless, just trying to get as far away from Charlie and the group as he possibly could. He ran until he couldn't run anymore, until he was clear across the grounds on the other side of the massive resort. Crying uncontrollably now, he collapsed down to the ground by a tree trunk in the middle of an open, grassy area. His mind was racing, reeling, remembering. He could only think of one thing and one thing only—

*Kevin.*

*Kevin, Kevin, Kevin…***

It was about to be their second visit together since they'd been forced to separate and go off to different schools. Connor hadn’t seen Kevin in almost two months. Two whole months, gosh, and he was determined to soak up every ounce of Kevin Price that he possibly could during the sparse few days they had together.

He missed Kevin terribly while they were apart. Sure, he enjoyed being at school. He really did. It was quite liberating for Connor, in fact, living in New York City and going to a very progressive, prestigious school such as NYU. It was, quite literally, a dream come true for him. He was taking really fun theatre classes and he’d made a ton of new friends, many who of whom were also gay, so they had that experience in common. He’d even met a couple of gay ex-Mormons, pleasantly surprising Connor, who were going to NYU too.

For the first time in Connor’s entire life, he truly felt welcomed by a group of people. Accepted, even. And that felt absolutely incredible.

That wasn’t to say he didn’t miss Kevin though. He missed everything about Kevin. His laughter, his gentle kisses, the little things he’d do here and there for Connor. And Connor cherished the little things. The surprise outings and gifts—silly things, usually, but they were special and important to Connor, because they were from Kevin. They were Kevin’s small ways of showing Connor how much he loved him.

And Kevin sure did love surprising Connor—sometimes, it was with tulips, his favorite flower, or his favorite candy (the chocolate-covered strawberry cream ones) or sometimes they were just really silly little things from the dollar store. Connor missed it all, but he especially missed Kevin’s arms—the strong arms he loved to have wrapped around his waist in the middle of the night, making him feel safe and warm and so very loved.

That was what he missed most of all.

But when Connor greeted Kevin at the airport, after his long, four-hour flight from New York to Salt Lake City, he instantly knew something was wrong with Kevin.

He knew something wrong the moment he raced off the plane, running desperately towards Kevin’s arms, aching to finally feel them wrapped around his waist once again—only to be received by unsure, timid hands and a kiss that felt limp and fearful. It was confusing and strange and it hurt Connor. But more so than that, the redhead felt worried—worried about his partner, Kevin.
As he stepped back from Kevin's arms, he noticed how gaunt the other man looked—how his clothes looked baggier than ever before and how he’d lost quite a bit of muscle mass. His hair appeared unkempt and messy and it looked as though he hadn’t bothered to keep it trimmed in quite some time. It was noticeably longer than usual, Connor observed. He knew something must have been wrong with Kevin—with *his* Kevin—if he wasn't even taking care of his hair.

“Hey, sweetie.” Connor said to him as they sat quietly during the half hour car ride from Salt Lake City airport to Connor’s parents’ house. “How, um, how have you been doing lately?”

“What do you mean?” Kevin asked, furrowing his brow in that way Connor always thought was adorable. “We talk on the phone every night, Connor. I told you already—I’m fine, just a little stressed about school, that’s all.”

“Oh.” Connor nodded, not really believing a word of it. “But I mean, you look like you’ve lost a lot of weight. Are you sure you’re eating enough at school? Do you have enough money?”

Kevin’s face turned pink at that. “Isn’t losing weight supposed to be a good thing?” The brunette tried his best to give him a small smirk, but Connor could tell it was a forced one.

“No, not when you weren’t overweight to begin with.” Connor said, softly. “I’m just a little worried about you. I mean, your hair—what happened to your hair?”

Kevin scowled at that as he ran a hand through it. “What about my hair?”

“It looks like you haven’t cut it in a long time.” Connor said, softly, trying not to anger his boyfriend or make him feel bad. “Are you sure everything’s okay?”

“I promise, I’m fine.” Kevin sighed. “I’ll go get my hair cut this weekend, if you really want.”

“No, it’s okay. I actually think the long look is kinda sexy.” Connor smirked. “I just wanted to make sure everything was okay with you, that's all.”

“Well, it is.”

Connor reached over to place a gentle hand on Kevin’s leg with the intent of giving it a comforting squeeze. What he didn’t expect to feel was Kevin jolting away with the complaint that it was distracting him from driving. Connor’s heart immediately sank at that and they didn’t talk again during the entire trip to the house.

***

All in all, Thanksgiving with Kevin and his family went *okay*. Not great, but okay.

His boyfriend had eventually calmed down a bit over the course of the visit, making Connor feel a little bit better about things. They mostly ate leftovers and cuddled, watching movies together all weekend long. They even kissed a little here and there. Granted, not as much as Connor would’ve liked, not nearly as much as he would've liked, but at least they kissed a little. They stayed up late talking the one night about life and school and things like that, which lessened Connor’s worries a bit. But Kevin still seemed awfully distant, as though he wasn’t entirely present, as though part of his mind was focused elsewhere, on something other than Connor.

But the words out of Kevin’s mouth kept telling him the complete opposite—that everything was fine and that he loved Connor with all of his heart, that everything would be alright. He told Connor about how he was almost finished with his NYU application and that all he wanted was to be with Connor again, in the same city, together.
“That’s still the plan”, he told Connor with a soft, assuring smile. "I promise."

The words out of Kevin’s mouth were comforting and Connor could tell he meant every word of it, too. Kevin had assured Connor enough times not to worry, so after they parted ways and Connor left to go back to school, he had no choice but to believe Kevin.

But still, Connor, being the incessant worrywart that he was, still couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. He started calling Kevin more often than before, just to see how he was doing, asking him question after question to try and get the other man to open up. But sometimes Kevin wouldn’t answer his texts or calls for a day or two at a time and that hurt Connor more than he’d ever let on, but he just kept on telling himself that Kevin was probably just busy with school.

***

Christmas eventually rolled around and Kevin flew, as planned, to visit Connor in New York City. There had been a time when Kevin was positively ecstatic about the prospect of visiting the big city for the first time. Because of Kevin’s initial excitement, Connor had planned to show him everything he possibly could and do everything, even the lame touristy things Connor had grown tired of. But, by the time Kevin finally arrived in the big city, it seemed as though he had little to no interest in doing much of anything.

“Come on, Kev.” Connor prodded one afternoon as they were both laying together in bed, cuddling. “Please? I promise you’ll have fun.”

Kevin was curled up in the fetal position, his face buried into the warm crook of Connor’s neck. He was clutching onto the redhead’s midsection so tightly, Connor felt as though he might pop.

“I told you already, I just don’t want to go out tonight.” The brunette sighed. “Why can’t we just stay in and cuddle tonight? You can pick the movie this time, I promise. I don’t even care if it’s some silly rom com. Can’t we just stay like this?”

“Sweetie.” Connor cooed and ran a handful of tender fingers through Kevin’s short locks of hair (he’d forced Kevin to get a haircut the first day he was in town—it was starting to look far too emo for Connor’s taste). “We’ve stayed in and cuddled four nights in a row now. Don’t you want to get out and see the city you’ll be living in next year?”

Connor could feel Kevin’s heart rate begin to quicken as the boy in his arms buried his face deeper into the crook of Connor’s neck.

“All my friends are going to this new gay bar on Christopher Street tonight.” Connor enthused with a smile. “It’s supposed to be really great. And, well, we’re both twenty-one ... we could go and maybe, I don’t know... drink a little, if you want to? I mean, only if you want to.” He suggested timidly, knowing very well that Kevin had never tried alcohol before.

That didn’t surprise him though—BYU was a dry campus, after all. NYU, on the other hand, was anything but and Connor had gone to many parties where he’d drank alcohol.

He just continued on after receiving nothing but silence from Kevin. “And I was thinking maybe we could even, um... I don’t know, I mean, my roommate is gone for Christmas break... so I was thinking that maybe afterwards we could come back here and, um, maybe... well, you know…”

Kevin sat up a little, seemingly alarmed now. “What—what are you trying to ask me, Connor?”

Connor shrugged shyly and looked down at his hands, where he was nervously fiddling with the blue topaz and silver promise ring adorning his left hand.
“I don’t know... we’ve been together for over two years now, Kevin, and we’re both a little older now. I mean, I just thought maybe we could, um... maybe we could try—try, um... having sex, maybe?” He asked shyly. He was certain his freckled cheeks were beet red by now. “I even bought some stuff for us to use... lube and condoms and stuff just in case you wanted to, um... you know, in case you wanted to try.”

“No, no, Connor. No.” He shook his head adamantly, his face turning bright red to match his partner’s. Connor could hear in his voice that he was starting to breathe a bit heavier, faster. “I’m not—I’m just not—I’m just not ready yet, okay?”

As Connor looked into Kevin’s eyes, he could tell the boy next to him was starting to panic, making the redhead feel instantly guilty. He hadn’t meant to make Kevin so nervous or freak him out. He just wanted... well, he wanted... Kevin.

“Shhh.” Connor soothed and ran a gentle hand through his hair. “You don’t have to get this upset every time I bring it up. Please just calm down, okay?”

Kevin swallowed hard and shook his head. “I’m just not—I’m not ready for that yet. I’m—I’m sorry.”

“Okay.” Connor nodded, sadly.

He scooted down closer to Kevin, gently knocking their foreheads together.

“Can I ask why not though?” Connor added with a little shrug. “Because if you’re just nervous, that’s okay because... well, because I’m nervous too.” He gave his boyfriend his softest smile, the one reserved just for Kevin, as he ran a slow hand down his chest. “We could be nervous together. It doesn’t have to be perfect or anything, I just thought we could tr—”

“Can we please stop talking about this?” Kevin asked softly, interrupting him. “I just—I just don’t want to talk about this anymore, okay? Please stop talking about this.”


It had been several months since Kevin even tried to touch him, in that way—in the sexual way. Even though they’d never had full on sex before, in the traditional sense, they used to at least touch one another in other ways—quite often, too. They’d even taken showers together and illicitly went skinny dipping a few times, back in Uganda.

But lately, Kevin seemed to have little to no interest in even kissing Connor, let alone having sex with him.

“Is it... is it... me, Kevin? Am I the problem?” Connor asked, quietly, after a few minutes of silence. “Am I not, um, am I not... am I not attractive to you anymore?”

“What?” Kevin gasped, seemingly confused at the question.

Connor blushed shyly as he trailed a hand over the soft skin of his own tummy, giving the squishy flesh a little squeeze. “I mean, I know I’ve put on a little weight since I’ve been away at school. I just thought maybe, that’s why you’ve been so, um—“

“No.” Kevin shook his head, letting out a sad sigh. He leaned in close to Connor and wrapped an arm securely around his belly. “You’re perfect, Connor. You’re perfect exactly the way you are. I didn’t mean to—I didn’t mean to make you feel bad about yourself or think that you weren’t—God, I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”
Connor gave Kevin a tearful smile and curled up next to him, giving him a squeeze. “Don’t be sorry. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” Kevin said, a lone tear rolling down his cheek. “It’s not okay.”

“It is okay.” Connor soothed. “I just wanted to make sure it wasn’t…_me_, that’s all.”

“No.” Kevin shook his head, sadly. “You’re amazing…you’re amazing and I love you. I’m—I’m sorry.”

“It’s just...there’s a lot of pressure on gay guys here to look perfect all the time, you know? But I haven’t gotten swept up into all that because…well, because I have you and I know you’re not superficial like that. But then I got scared because...because you haven’t wanted to touch me in such a long time. I just got scared, that’s all.” Connor admitted, biting down on his bottom lip thoughtfully.

“But you never tell me _why_ you’re so stressed.” Connor said, softly. “I’m here to help you. I’m your _boyfriend_, for Christ’s sakes. You’re supposed to tell me these things. I’m supposed to help you. That’s what a relationship is for. That’s what I’m here for...but you never let me help you.”

“I know, but—it’s just,” Kevin shook his head. “It’s all just so stupid. It’s all just stupid school stuff.”

“It doesn’t seem like stupid school stuff to me.” The redhead said, quietly. “In fact, it seems like you’re carrying the whole weight of the world on your shoulders, so much that you don’t seem to want to do _anything_ anymore.” He admitted honestly, giving Kevin a reassuring squeeze. “You know, if you’re feeling this depressed, there are therapists you could see about that kind of thing who could help you—“

“No!” Kevin snapped, shaking his head. “I’m fine, really. And if you want me to go out to that gay club with you and your friends tonight, I’ll—I’ll go, I’ll go, I’ll—”

“Shhhh. I don’t want to _make_ you go if you don’t really want to go, Kevin.” Connor whispered softly. “I’m perfectly happy staying home and cuddling with you, okay?”

“Thanks.” Kevin sighed with a small smile. “And maybe on Valentine’s Day, when you come visit me, maybe we could, um...you know, on Valentine’s Day...“

“What about Valentine’s Day?” Connor asked with a mischievous smile.

“Maybe we could, um...maybe we could try...try having sex, on—on Valentine’s Day.” Kevin offered, albeit with a bit of a stammer, his voice seeming awfully unsure of the words coming out of his mouth.

Connor pressed his forehead up against Kevin’s, the redhead giggling softly. “Really? Do you mean that?”

“I mean it.” Kevin whispered and laid a warm kiss to his boyfriend’s lips. “I love you.”

They fell asleep together later that night with their arms wrapped around each other’s waists—
content, safe, happy.

And, for a little while at least, Connor was convinced that everything would, indeed, work out fine—because Kevin always assured him that everything was going to be okay.

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Connor spent the next month and a half counting down the days until Valentine’s Day—until the day he and Kevin would finally have sex together. The very thought of it was driving Connor bonkers. He’d saved up all the money he possibly could so he would have enough to fly home the weekend of February 14th. He booked their usual hotel room and made sure to have flowers and champagne sent up to the room. He packed all of the “supplies” they’d need, including a rather sexy undergarment he hoped Kevin would find alluring. He was nervous and scared and excited and so in love that he could barely contain the stupidly large grin on his face the entire week leading up to the trip.

But, as things usually went with Kevin, these days—nothing ended up going according to plan.

It started out perfect, with Kevin bringing Connor his favorite candy and tulips, making the redhead beam giddily from ear to ear. Connor had gotten Kevin candy too, along with a new set of Disney pajamas, a pair he didn’t have already.

Then they went out for a nice, romantic dinner, where Kevin insisted on paying, despite Connor’s ardent objections. The sweet, dorky brunette sitting across from him, on the other side of their shared plates of chicken parmesan and spaghetti, almost seemed like the old Kevin again—the one who smiled a lot and laughed heartily and shook his head, beaming, whenever Connor said something cute or silly. They giggled and flirted and kissed a little and held hands and the conversation flowed easily. It seemed as though things might finally be getting back to normal. Maybe school had lightened up for Kevin or maybe he was just really happy to see Connor. The redhead didn’t know which was which or what was what—all he knew was that Kevin—his Kevin—seemed to be acting almost normal again.

And they tried having sex after dinner, they really did—Connor nervously gulping down a few glasses of champagne to try and ease his jumbled nerves, while Kevin just sipped lightly on his. They cuddled for a long time in bed, kissing—Kevin’s kisses feeling a bit too anxious to be all that romantic—but that was okay. Connor was willing to give Kevin all the time and patience that he needed. And Kevin seemed to need an awful long time to finally relax and get in the mood. He told Connor that he needed to go slow, that he needed time to ease into it, so that he would be less nervous when the moment finally came.

But by the time the moment finally came, Connor watched as Kevin’s face paled, watched him grow more and more anxious. Connor could see the man on top of him was trembling now, shaking from nerves. Nevertheless, Kevin leaned down and kissed his partner on the lips, the tip of his member readied in front of Connor's entrance. Kevin tried to do it, he tried really hard to just relax and go with it, but eventually it was just too much for him to handle and he lost his erection. Connor was devastated and did everything in his power to try and get it back, but it was just no use. The moment was over. And that made Connor feel like just about the least attractive person on the planet.

It made Connor cry, of course, that Kevin had lost his erection right before they were about to have sex for the very first time—a moment Connor had looked forward to for far too long, a moment he’d imagined in his head a million times over.

Everything was ruined and everything hurt.
He cried and screamed at Kevin, pushing him out of the way so he could run to the bathroom, where he’d spend the next hour or so bawling his eyes out all alone, by himself, with Kevin knocking frantically at the door, shouting, begging for Connor to come out so he could explain himself.

But Connor didn’t want to hear it. He just didn’t want to hear it. As far as he was concerned, the person he loved most in the entire world was slowly starting to fall out of love with him—and he honestly couldn't think of anything more terrifying than that.

"Daddy?" Charlie asked, in a tone of voice uncharacteristically sad for the normally-cheerful little girl.

"Yeah, hun?" Kevin replied, giving her tube a little twirl in hopes of making her crack a smile.

Kevin was in the adult pool with his daughter, Charlie clad in one of those weird little kiddie swimsuits that also doubled as a flotation device. She was inside of yet another tube, clutching onto the sides for dear life, even though Kevin had told her she didn’t have to, that her swimmie was enough to keep her afloat. Kevin was having a ball pulling his daughter around the pool, twirling her around in the tube, making her laugh whenever he pulled just a little too fast.

But, soon after, her face would quickly return to it’s rather solemn state.

"I think I made Uncle Connor very sad." She admitted, her lips puckering out a bit in that way she always did. It was her way of telling Kevin that her heart was hurting without actually having to say it. "I didn't mean to do it, Daddy. I promise, I didn’t.”

Kevin let out a small chuckle at that.

"That’s what she’s been so worried about? Charlie may have made Connor feel a lot of emotions, but sad certainly wasn’t one of them.

“That’s so silly, sweetheart.” Kevin said, leaning in so the tip of his nose could bump gently against Charlie’s. “I happen to know for a fact that you could never make your Uncle Connor sad.”

When Charlie didn’t say anything else on the matter, Kevin pulled back a bit and looked into her eyes. They looked positively heartbroken.

"Charlie?" Kevin asked, suddenly a bit more worried. “What’s the matter?”

“I told you, Daddy.” Charlie said, pouting. “I made Uncle Connor really sad. It’s all my fault. I made his face look very sad.”

“Sweetie,” Kevin shook his head with a sigh, “if Uncle Connor is feeling sad today, I promise, it has nothing to do with you, okay?”

Charlie sniffled in and swam a little closer to Kevin, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Okay, Daddy.”

“There’s my big girl.” Kevin said as he squeezed Charlie tightly into his chest. After pulling back, he glanced over at Connor. The redhead was sitting, alone, at one of the picnic tables near the pool. His face looked glum, yet pensive and lined with concentration, as though he was in deep thought about something.
Charlie was right about one thing—something was definitely wrong with her Uncle Connor.

Connor was still sitting in the same spot near the pool, at one of the tables with an umbrella, where he’d been sitting for the past two hours. He couldn’t help it. He needed to think. His mind just wouldn’t stop replaying memory after memory of Kevin, of them together, memories that might provide some clues to help explain Charlie’s heartbreaking words.

_Not you, Uncle Connor. I’m talking about the bad Connor, the one who made my daddy like boys in the way you’re not supposed to like boys._

_The bad Connor made my daddy do things. Things that made God really mad at him._

_But it’s okay because Grandma says the men at school fixed him. They fixed my daddy so he wouldn’t like boys anymore. Now he’s all better._

_I’m really happy my daddy’s all better, aren’t you?_

Looking back and knowing what he knew now, Connor couldn’t even believe how dense he’d been, to believe Kevin’s transparent lies so easily. No matter how many times Kevin had told him that everything was okay, that everything was fine—Connor should’ve known better. He should’ve known better. He should’ve known that Kevin wasn’t okay—that nothing was okay at all.

It was all right there, he thought to himself, written plain as day in Kevin’s eyes—his worn, tired, uncertain eyes—and, yet, for some reason, Connor refused to see it. He refused to believe his boyfriend would choose to lie instead of leaning on someone for support. But now—now it was all starting to make sense. _So much sense._ So much sense that Connor could physically feel his heart aching. He couldn’t stop thinking about all those times he should have seen through Kevin’s paper thin lies…all those times Connor had just nodded and turned away, dejected, not bothering to dig any deeper than he had to.

“At the risk of sounding like I actually care,” he suddenly heard a voice say with a sigh, “what on Earth is going on with you?”

When Connor lifted his head from its place, face-down against his arm, he saw Kevin sitting across from him, a smirk on his face and an arm outstretched towards Connor with a frozen pina colada in his hand.

“I got you a pina colada.” Kevin said, softly. “Here, take it.”

“It’s not even noon yet.” Connor deadpanned with a wry smile. “A little early to start drinking, no?”

“Oh.” Kevin said, his brow creased in thought as though he’d just realized, for the first time, that pina coladas contained alcohol. “I’ll, uh, I’ll go see if someone else wants it. Sorry.”

“Oh, will you just give it to me?” Connor huffed and greedily snatched it away from Kevin’s hands. “It’s five o’clock somewhere, right? And I’m on vacation.”

“And if I remember correctly,” Kevin said, grinning stupidly as Connor took a sip, “you really like pina coladas.”
“And getting caught in the rain.” Connor sang, finishing the lyric to *The Pina Colada Song*, one of his go-to karaoke tunes. He closed his eyes with a sigh and shook his head once he realized how cheesy that just sounded. “Sorry, that was really dumb.”

Kevin let out a small laugh at the joke and Connor’s heartbeat instantly quickened at the sound.

“Are you sure there’s nothing bothering you?” Kevin asked again, after a quiet moment of watching Connor solemnly sip his pina colada.

“No, nothing’s bothering me.” Connor lied, waving him off. “I’m fine.”

“Because, um, Charlie has this crazy idea that she made you sad or something.” Kevin shifted a bit in his seat. “She even asked me to tell you how sorry she is, but I have no idea why she thinks she made you sad.” Kevin paused for a moment and looked down at his hands. “Do you know why she might’ve said that?”

Connor gazed at Kevin for a long moment before finally allowing his lips to curl up just a little. “Charlie could never make me sad, Kevin. She’s a sweetheart and I’m crazy about her. Tell her not to worry, okay?”

And he meant every word of it, too. He adored Charlie. He adored everything about Charlie. The way she looked so much like Kevin, the way she sounded when she’d get really, really happy about something and she’d squeal like baby piglet, and the way she’d say the funniest, craziest things sometimes. But he especially loved the way she looked at Kevin, so adoringly and full of love.

And those terrible things the little girl’s grandmother had said to her, that she later repeated to Connor, those things that had come out of Charlie’s mouth—those words weren’t Charlie’s. Charlie didn’t know any better. She was just repeating what she’d heard. And it was sad. The whole thing was just very, very sad, Connor thought. Connor knew Charlie had a good heart. She had an amazing heart. Kids were never born hating other people, they were always made that way, by ignorant adults.

Connor was hellbent on undoing whatever damage Charlie’s grandmother had done to her. But, first, he had the problem of Kevin. His sweet, sweet Kevin.

“That’s what I told her.” Kevin smiled, looking visibly relieved. “Well, good, I’m glad.”

They shared a brief pause until the other man went to stand up.

“Wanna come in the pool with us?” Kevin asked, hopefully. “Arnold and Chris are starting a game of beach ball volleyball. It sounds like it might get pretty serious.” He smiled, probably just to make Connor feel better. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“I’m okay, Kevin.” Connor said, waving him off. “You guys play. I’m really fine here.”

Kevin looked like he wanted to say something else, but he didn’t. As he got up to leave and rejoin the group, Connor suddenly reached out and grabbed Kevin by the arm, pulling him back. He hadn’t intended to grab him like that. He honestly hadn’t even realized what he’d done until it was too late.

“Wait.” Connor said softly, clutching Kevin’s arm. “Don’t go.”

Kevin hesitantly turned back around to face Connor, a mixture of fear and confusion lining his face.

“Don’t go yet.” Connor continued, quietly. “There—there is something the matter.”
Kevin’s eyes softened with concern as he stepped cautiously back to Connor.

“What is it?” Kevin asked, hesitantly, and Connor could hear his nervous swallow. “Anything, um, anything you feel like talking about?”

Kevin had never been very good at dealing with feelings and stuff like that, even when they were his own. Dealing with feelings was always Connor’s job, back when they were together. And from the looks of things now, that was still Connor’s job.

Kevin rambled on, nervously. “I mean, I know you’d probably rather talk to Chris or James or Naba or someone else…anyone else, probably…” He trailed off with a sigh, “but, I’m, um, I’m here too… if you need anything.”

Connor felt as though he might cry. He wasn’t even sure why. Maybe it was because Connor finally knew the truth, the truth about what had happened to Kevin, all those years ago. The truth about what he had been hiding, holding in, keeping down. The reason he broke Connor’s heart, all those years before. And it just about broke Connor’s heart now, too. It broke his heart into so many pieces, he could barely even count them all. He no longer felt like picking on Kevin for being a big dummy or making him jealous by flirting with other men in front of him or snapping at him whenever he’d say the wrong thing at the wrong time. He didn’t feel like doing any of those things. Not anymore. Not now that every little word out of Kevin’s mouth, every subtle dig at Connor, every flinch, every nervous shuffle, every little action was suddenly laced with a thousand pounds of subtext and scars and unspoken painful memories. Kevin was carrying around so much baggage and trauma and pain that Connor didn’t even know how he managed this long without going insane. He just didn’t know what to do with Kevin—with his Kevin.

He did know that, no matter what he did, he needed to do it very carefully, with restraint and gentleness and patience and understanding. He was still good at all of those things, right? He just hadn’t had to put them to use in a while. It was probably just like riding a bike. Yes, he could do this. How he approached this very sensitive topic with Kevin would be everything. And Connor wanted to help, not make things worse than they already were.

“I do want to talk to you, Kevin.” Connor said, after a moment, swallowing rather loudly. “But, um, not here.”

Kevin’s eyebrows furrowed, in confusion. “Why not here?”

“Because I need to be alone with you.” Connor said, quietly, swallowing rather hard again. “What would you say about maybe—maybe going to dinner with me tonight?”

“Dinner?” Kevin asked, warily, as though the very idea of eating dinner was ludicrous.

“Dinner?”

“But we go to dinner every night.” Kevin said, running a nervous hand through his messy waves of hair. “All together, as a group.”

“Well, not tonight.” Connor said, slow and careful. “Tonight, we’re going to have dinner together. Just you and me.”

“We are?”

“Yes.” Connor said, as gentle as possible. “We are.”

“Just—”, Kevin swallowed hard, “just us?”
“Just us.” Connor repeated. He gave Kevin what he really hoped was a comforting smile. “Is that okay with you?”

“But what about Charlie?” He stammered. “She—“

“—will be just fine with Arnold and Naba.” Connor finished for him.

“I’m not—I’m not going out on a date with you, Connor, just because you happen to be sad about something today.” Kevin snapped, a bit harshly. Connor could tell he was feeling confused and flustered and he honestly couldn't blame him for that. “This can’t be a date. We’ve been over this. We’ve been over this a thousand times. I’m not like—”

“I know.” Connor cut him off. “I’m not asking you on a date.” He assured, meaning it. “I just want to have dinner with you, alone, so we can talk, alright?”

“Talk.” Kevin repeated the word, with a look of pure terror on his face. “You want to talk.”

“Talk.” Connor repeated. “We’re just going to talk. You and me, alone.”

“Not a date.”

The horrified look on Kevin’s face made Connor involuntarily laugh a little.

“Not a date.” Connor shook his head, a small laugh escaping his throat. “God, you are so silly sometimes.”

“Not a date.” Kevin said yet again, letting out a deep sigh of relief. “Okay, then it’s a date.” His eyes then widened with the realization of what he’d just said. “I mean, it’s not a date!”

“Oh, now it’s a date, huh?” Connor teased, knowing full well that Kevin had just misspoke. He supposed the desire to tease the flustered brunette hadn’t completely gone away. The man in front of him was still Kevin, after all. His Kevin. And he’d always loved teasing his Kevin.

“No!” Kevin sputtered. “I just said the wrong thing.”

“Freudian slip?”

“I meant not a date, Connor.” He heaved in a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. “It’s a ‘not date’.”

“A ‘not date’.” Connor said with finality. “I like that.”

“Good. I’m glad we’re on the same page.” Kevin nodded. “I’m gonna go, um...I’m gonna play volleyball in the pool now, okay?”

Connor nodded.

“You’re not gonna, uh, grab me again, are you?” Kevin asked, fearfully.

“No, but I think I am feeling a little better now.” Connor said with a smile, because, in truth, he was feeling better now. “Mind if I join you? I actually kick some pretty bad ass at beach ball volleyball.”

With that, Connor rested a comforting hand on the small of Kevin’s back, making him flinch just a little, much like he always did. But this time, Connor didn’t rip his hand away. Instead, he chose to leave it there, so that Kevin could relearn what it feels like, relearn that it’s okay to touch each other
like that, that’s okay for a man to touch the small of another man’s back like that. Kevin tried to yank himself away, but Connor didn’t let him and when they reached the pool, Connor gave him a playful push into the water, making him yelp, at first, but then once he came up for air, he was laughing. He was laughing that perfect, musical, Kevin Price laugh that lit up the light in Connor’s heart.

_Baby steps._
Chapter Summary

This thing is as long as an entire fic. I'm sorry in advance.

Chapter Notes

**Legend:**

*** = Asterisks are memory scenes  
___ = Regular lines are present day scenes

Purple Dividers = Kevin POV  
Blue Dividers = Connor POV  
~ = POV switch within a scene

Feedback makes my day, so if you liked it, let me know! :)

Chapter 8: Not a Date

Kevin Price was standing in front of the mirror, tugging on his dark blue button-down shirt, dissatisfied with the way it looked, tucked into his jeans. He knew he shouldn’t even care how he looked. He wasn’t ever going to be with a man again, not in that way anyway, and especially not with Connor, so why did he even care how he looked? This wasn’t a date, so it didn’t matter in the slightest what he looked like.

And, yet, he did care. Very much so.

He sighed as he yanked his pants off yet again, in favor of going with the softer khakis he had discarded on the bed earlier in the evening. After looking himself over one last time, he carefully ran a comb through his hair. He had even laced it with some hair gel and poofed it up just a little, something he hadn't bothered to do in years. He always used to put gel in his hair, years ago, just to give it that little extra *coiff*, but these days, he just didn’t seem to have any use for it. He begrudgingly had to ask James Church (on the down low, of course) if he could borrow some of his hair gel since he didn’t even bother to carry it with him anymore. His hair, at the very least, wasn’t too long or overgrown anymore, not like how it used to be. He was a dad with an office job now, so he had to at least maintain the pretense of being an upstanding, put-together professional who had ambitions of climbing the corporate ladder of success.
But the truth was, all he cared about was Charlie. Charlie came first, always, followed by his family and Arnold and Naba. And, though riddled with past hurt and turmoil, his parents too. Everything he did was centered around making sure they were happy and that everything in his life stayed exactly as it was. Because as long as everything stayed exactly as it was, then things would remain okay. Not great, but at least, okay.

This dinner with Connor, on the other hand, felt like the complete opposite of okay. It felt strange and dangerous and unsafe, as though he were stepping back into something that was probably better off left alone. But he had (stupidly) promised Connor that he would be there for him, to listen, as he vented about whatever it was that was troubling him.

So Kevin Price would, reluctantly, go out on this not-date with Connor McKinley and let him talk, for as long as he wanted, about whatever it was that was bothering him. But under absolutely no circumstances was Kevin about to get sucked back into the very thing that nearly destroyed his life, all those years ago. Not now. Not ever. Kevin Price was doing just fine exactly as he was, as an island—an island with a small little sub-island named Charlie—and that was all he needed in life to be happy. Well, okay, there was also the large, neighboring island named Cunningham that often crashed itself into Kevin’s island, but that was okay too. It was okay because it was, at the very least, predictable and loving and safe. He’d charted that particular island enough times in his life to know just how safe it was.

But the island named Connor McKinley was anything but safe. At first glance, it may have looked unassuming, on the outside, but it was actually riddled with confusion and doubt and fear and memories and it had that smile, that smug smile, and that gentle voice—the gentlest, when he wanted it to be—and it was just so, so contrary to everything he was trying to be that Kevin honestly wasn’t even sure why he was daring to tread it once again, even under the innocent guise of friendship. One thing was for certain, though—Kevin Price would not give in to Connor’s tears or charms or any of his other tricks designed to try and persuade him into running back into his arms. And he certainly was not about to let this be a date.

“Alright,” Kevin sighed as he entered the living area of the suite. “How do I look?”

Arnold and Naba’s eyes lit up the moment they got a good look at him. His best friends began circling around him, excitedly, as though he were some kind of glorious statue on display, grabbing at his clothes and looking him up and down in awe. It made him feel a little uncomfortable, as though he were a zoo animal or something.

“Knock it off, will ya?” Kevin swatted their hands away with the tiniest smile.

“I just can’t believe it, Kev,” Arnold shook his head in amazement. “It looks just like the old you.”

“He means you look wonderful, Kevin,” Naba said sweetly, running a comforting hand over his arm. “And I’m sure Connor will think so too.”

“I mean, it doesn’t even matter, right?” Kevin quickly squashed their words of encouragement. “It’s just Connor. This isn’t a date or anything.”

“Suuuure, it’s not,” Arnold teased.

“It’s not, Arnold,” Kevin insisted, feeling himself getting more annoyed by the second. “He practically forced me into this whole thing in the first place, said he wants to ‘talk’... ,” he motioned with air quotes. “—or something. Whatever that’s supposed to mean.”

“It probably means he wants to talk,” Naba offered with knowing eyes as she straightened out his tie.
with practiced ease.

“Once he’s done drooling over you, that is,” Arnold nudged him. “Because he is going to drool.”

“He can drool all he wants,” Kevin huffed. “That doesn’t mean this is anything more than two old friends having dinner together, one friend talking noticeably more than the other, and getting back home in time to tuck Charlie into bed.”

“Whatever you say bud,” Arnold whistled, but when all he received was a death glare from Kevin, he relented. “In all seriousness, we are just... so proud of you, buddy. You two have come such a long way over the past few days. It’s pretty amazing, don’t you think?”

“Amazing isn’t exactly the word I’d use,” Kevin snorted as he attempted to smooth back a rogue piece of hair that wasn't behaving. “What does it matter anyway? After this trip, he’ll go back to New York and I’ll go home to Salt Lake City. We’ll see each other once a year at some birthday or wedding something or other and that’ll be that.”

“Oh, then you haven’t heard,” Naba said, her voice quiet and the ever-present sparkle in her eyes, dimmed, if only a little.

“ Heard what?” Kevin asked. He grabbed the hairspray bottle off the table and gave that misbehaving patch of hair one last spritz.

“About Connor,” Arnold started before hesitating a moment. “He’s… well, he’s been taking a little break from New York to be with his mom in Utah. She, um...well, she hasn’t been doing so well lately, Kev.”

Kevin felt his heart stop beating for just a moment, but quickly put his stoic face back on. “What's wrong with his mom?”

“I think we better let Connor tell you in person, buddy.”

“No, tell me now,” Kevin demanded, completely breaking the facade he had going of pretending like he didn't care. “What’s wrong with his mom? Is she sick or something?” If something important was going on with Connor, he wanted to know about it. Even if this wasn’t a date, Kevin still cared about Connor a great deal, no matter how much he didn't want to admit it to anyone—least of all, himself.

“I really think we should just let Connor tell you, Kev,” Arnold repeated himself. “Maybe that’s why he wants to have dinner with you tonight. He might just need someone to talk to about it or something.”

Kevin opened his mouth to speak, but was quickly cut off by Naba. “You better go, Kevin,” she urged and gave him a gentle push towards the door.

“And try to have fun, okay?” Arnold chimed in. “Maybe even smile a little. You remember how to do that, right?”

“Fine,” Kevin relented with a sigh. “But only because I have to meet him in, like,” he glanced down anxiously at his watch. “—five minutes. We have dinner reservations for seven-thirty at Salvatore’s on International Drive. We can’t be late or they won’t even seat us.”

Arnold and Naba exchanged another knowing glance, the couple’s earlier giddiness returning to their faces with full force. Kevin just scowled. “What?”

“Nothing,” Arnold replied, trying to sound non-chalant. “It just... sounds kinda fancy for something
that’s not supposed to be a date, that’s all.”

“Alright, I’m leaving,” Kevin dismissed the comment, ignoring whatever insane thought he knew was running amuck inside Arnold’s head. “You sure you’re okay watching Char—?”

“Yes, yes, she’s practically our daughter too,” his best friend assured, giving him another push in the direction of the door.

“And we even told her she could stay in our room tonight,” Naba added with a wink. “You know, just in case.”

“Just in case?” Kevin scrunched up his face in confusion. “Just in case what?”

“You know,” she rolled her eyes with a grin. “Just in case you two end up fu—ow!”

“—needing the room,” Arnold hurriedly corrected his wife’s profanity with an elbow to the stomach. “Just in case you two end up needing the room tonight for some of that private... delicate... alone time adults like to have together without the kids around. You know, the kind you haven’t enjoyed in years?”

Kevin felt his eyes go wide and the temperature in his cheeks skyrocket to the moon. He knew damn well what Naba and Arnold were most certainly alluding to and he didn’t like it one bit. He just stood there for a long moment, glaring at the two of them as though they’d suddenly sprouted ten heads. This was it. Arnold and Naba had finally gone insane. He huffed a little and stormed off towards the door. Clasping the handle, he turned back around one more time to face the couple, who were now just standing there together, beaming dopily at him.

“You two are crazy, you know that? I love you, but you’re crazy,” Kevin stammered. “Under no circumstances will Connor and I ever ‘need the room’, so just...get that dirty thought out of your heads right now, alright? This is not a date,” he stressed with finality. “Got it?”

“Got it,” they replied in unison, but not without sharing another hopeful glance, souring Kevin’s tummy on the spot.

No matter what those two crazies thought, Kevin knew that this was absolutely, unequivocally, without question, not a date.

_____________________

Connor McKinley stood in the bedroom that Chris and James inhabited, tugging at the hem of his maroon-colored shirt, dissatisfied with the way it looked, draped loosely over his black dress pants. At first, he was going to go with a dark purple dress shirt that had a bit of a shimmer to it, but soon decided that one looked just a little too gay for the quite serious conversation he wanted to have with Kevin that evening—a conversation he had absolutely no idea how to even start. How could he even start?

He knew Kevin Price very well—too well—so he knew the other man would be stupidly stubborn and reluctant to open up about what happened, just like he always was. Connor would have to put on his old hat again, the one that was loving and patient and kind and didn’t pick on Kevin quite as much as he did these days. He could do this, though. He knew he could. It just wouldn’t be very easy, that’s all. But Connor did know one thing—that it would, without a doubt, be one hundred percent worth it.
Anything to get Kevin back to the person he used to be, to the one who laughed a lot and smiled wide and boasted too much and maybe was more than a little bit arrogant, but in the best possible way. The one who flirted quite poorly, like an awkward sixth grader, but who was also the best kisser Connor McKinley had ever had the good fortune to kiss. The one who wasn’t afraid to be himself, be damned what anybody else might think. Anything to get that Kevin Price—the real Kevin Price—back, had to be worth it. Even if it didn’t result in him and Kevin getting back together, even if it didn’t even help to mend the delicate sort-of-friendship they had going, it would still be worth it. Any step at all in the right direction would make all of this worth it. Yes, Connor McKinley was prepared to be selfless this time. He was doing all of this for Kevin—for his Kevin.

Smoothing out yet another shirt over his soft, pale body, he stepped back and took one last look at himself in the mirror. The final choice: a light blue short-sleeved button down shirt, tucked in, with a pair of dark blue skinny jeans, accessorized by brown suede dress shoes and a not-too-gay-but-sort-of-gay dark blue messenger bag strapped over his chest. Not bad, Connor thought, as he did one last twirl in front of the mirror.

“How do I look?” He asked his friends as he stepped out of the bedroom and into the kitchenette, where Chris and James were sitting together, talking quietly and munching on snack foods. James did a flirty whistle, to indicate all of his thoughts on Connor’s look without using any words. Chris just frowned disapprovingly.

“I thought you weren’t getting sucked back into this?” Chris asked for what seemed like the hundredth time that week.

“I’m not,” Connor lied. “But Kevin’s taking me to this fancy restaurant he used to go to with his family. Apparently it’s really nice and I don’t want to look out of place or anything.”

“He’s taking you?” Chris asked, skeptically. “As in, taking you on a date?”

Connor rolled his eyes. So maybe he used the wrong choice of words. “Okay, I didn’t mean he’s literally taking me, but he’s more familiar with Orlando than I am and he suggested the place. It’s not a date.”

“Well, I think you look amazing, Con,” James offered supportively. “He’s sure to be drooling all over you.”

“Are you forgetting we don’t want that?” Chris asked, confused at his husband’s reaction. “Or do you not remember what happened the last time?”

Connor watched on as his two very-much-in-love friends bickered for the next few minutes over his non-existent love life with Kevin.

“So, just stop,” Connor finally said in his old District Leader voice, the one that was gentle, yet authoritative. He watched James playfully nudge Chris in the belly.

“You better behave yourself or Elder McKinley’s gonna put you on garbage duty again,” he joked, referencing Connor’s usual threat to the boys from the old days, back in Uganda.

“Very funny,” Connor replied with an amused eye roll. “But seriously, you guys, this isn’t a date. I wanted to go out with Kevin tonight so I could try and...figure some things out, that’s all.”


“You know, just...things. Answers to questions. Just...things...and stuff.” Connor trailed off, his voice unsure and hesitant. “Things and stuff.”

“Look, I promise I’ll explain all of this to you guys later, okay? But, right now, can you just cool it with the date talk?” Connor begged, knowing full well how pained his voice must have sounded. “This isn’t what you think it is. And, to be honest, I don’t think it ever will be again, so please just stop saying it, alright? Because it completely breaks my heart every time you do.”

Chris’s eyes softened at Connor’s admission. He stood up after a moment and pulled his best friend into a warm embrace. Connor closed his eyes and leaned into Chris’s hug, moving to rest his head into the crook of his friend’s neck. It felt warm and comforting, being held like that, and Connor began racking his brain, trying to recall the last time he’d experienced it. When he couldn’t think of the last time, he knew that it must have been far too long ago. With one last gentle squeeze from Chris, Connor sniffled and pulled back.

“Thanks.” Connor gave him a weak smile. “I really needed that.”

“We love you, Con,” Chris said gently, his voice full of earnest. “And we only ever want you to be happy. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” Connor nodded with a sad smile. “Of course I know.”

James stood up as well and wrapped one arm around his husband’s shoulders and the other around Connor’s, pulling them both into a group hug, all of their heads knocking together in the center of the huddle.

“Guys?” Chris eventually spoke up, after a while, breaking the comfortable silence they had been sharing.

“Yeah?”

“This is so gay,” Chris said with a little laugh.

And the other men’s laughter soon followed.

Kevin and Connor met in the hotel lobby at exactly seven o’clock, where they had a cab picking them up to bring them to dinner. Greeting each other was more awkward and tense than usual, but thank goodness the cab was already there, pulled up to the curb.

“You look nice,” Connor spoke up first as they climbed into the backseat of the cab. “I’m really digging the blazer,” he added with an approving smile.

“Oh, thanks,” Kevin replied softly, fairly certain the unexpected compliment had made his cheeks flush. “I wasn’t even sure I’d have anything decent left to wear, it being so close to the end of the trip and all. But I guess I’d packed one suit, just in case I ended up going out someplace nice or something.”

Connor nodded thoughtfully before reaching out to run a gentle hand over the lip of Kevin’s blazer. “It suits you.”

“What? The blazer?” Kevin asked, looking down and self-consciously tugging on the jacket.
Connor just smiled, lingering his hand atop Kevin’s chest for just another moment. “I meant, dressing up nice, fixing your hair, putting on a blazer. All of it. It suits you.”

“Oh,” Kevin murmured. If he wasn’t blushing before, he was definitely blushing now. He just hoped Connor wouldn’t make some smart ass comment about it like he usually did.

But a sweet and earnest “you look good” was all Connor said, surprisingly.

“Thanks. I mean, you too,” Kevin stammered, before turning hurriedly to the driver. “Salvatore’s on I-Drive, please.”

“You got it.”

“I-Drive?” Connor teased once Kevin had leaned back into his seat. “What’s that, some kind of local Orlando lingo?”

“Yes, actually.” Kevin scowled. “That’s what the locals call it. I-Drive.”

“Of course it is,” Connor said, letting out a little snort-laugh, one that was designed to subtly tease Kevin. When the other man just glared at him, however, he relented. “Alright, I told myself I wouldn’t pick on you tonight, so I’m not going to say anything else about it. I-Drive it is.”

Kevin just frowned and turned to face away from Connor. But after a few minutes of silence went by, it started to feel awkward again.

“So, why’d you want to do this, anyway?” Kevin eventually asked, cutting through the silent tension with the only question on his mind. The burning question that had been on his mind all day long, taunting him, gnawing at him, making him nauseous and lose the most heated game of beach ball volleyball of the entire trip.

“Oh, well, I, um,” Connor stumbled over his words, seemingly taken aback at the question. Kevin watched him think for a moment, but after a while passed and Connor still said nothing intelligible on the matter, he was growing more and more confused. Why was Connor acting so weird tonight?

“My mom?” The redhead asked, eyes wide and confused. “What about my mom?”

“Nothing, nothing at all. I’m sorry,” Kevin quickly apologized. “It’s just...Arnold said...he and Naba, they told me something was going on with your mom. So I just assumed that was why you, um...wanted to do this, why you wanted to have dinner with me. I thought maybe you wanted to talk about it...or something.”

“No, Kevin,” the other man sighed and closed his eyes. “I mean, there is something going on with my mom, but that isn’t why I wanted to have dinner with you tonight.”

“Okay,” Kevin nervously gulped, not quite sure he even had any guesses left for what it could possibly be. The curiosity was starting to eat away at him though. “Then what is the reason?”

“Maybe I just wanted an excuse to see you all dressed up,” Connor smiled sadly as he ran a tender hand over the lip of Kevin’s dark blue blazer. This time, however, Kevin felt himself flinch a little at the touch, making Connor’s smile falter and the familiar twinkle in his eyes instantly dim.
“Not funny,” Kevin tried to joke as Connor removed his hand, but it just came out sounding nervous and false. He was trying his best to lighten the mood a little. And why was the mood so dark? He even tried to put a smirk on his face, just to cheer Connor up a little and let him know that nothing needed to be so grave, but he honestly wasn’t sure if it was working or not. Judging by the long, morose look still plastered on Connor’s face, he didn’t think it was working. “Now, come on, tell me the real reason.”

“Let’s, um, let’s just get to the restaurant first, okay?” Connor suggested, uncharacteristically nervous and evading the question.

What the heck was on Connor’s mind that was making him act so...different tonight? It wasn’t like Connor to be this elusive, this mysterious. He was typically honest to a fault, a real straight shooter. He was also usually good with words and talking and all that emotional crap, so why would he have said he wanted to talk but then not talk?

“Then we can talk, alright?” Connor went on. “At dinner. We can talk at dinner.”

“Alright, I guess.” Kevin shrugged, not exactly pleased with all the secrecy and stalling and not knowing what the Hell was going on. Kevin liked to know exactly what was going on, at all times. That way, he could prepare himself. But tonight, with Connor, it seemed as though there was no way to prepare himself. He eventually turned away from Connor, in favor of staring blankly at the back of the driver’s seat. But after a few moments passed by in silence, Kevin felt himself growing more and more restless by the second. “This isn’t a date, you know,” he finally snapped. “So you better have a damn good reason for dragging me out like this.”

He’d said the words rather harshly, callous and unforgiving. He knew that. And he honestly hadn’t intended for them to come out sounding so mean, but they did. He knew they did. But he left them out there anyway, dangling, as a warning, without saying he was sorry. He just hoped it would prod Connor into telling him whatever was bothering him sooner rather than later, so they could just get this whole thing over with and go home.

Connor didn’t reply to his harsh words with anything more than a tired eye roll, however, causing yet another long, strained silence to come over the pair—one that didn’t let up until after they walked into the restaurant.

“You’re making it really hard to be nice to you tonight, you know that?” Connor sighed as they finally sat down at their table. After listening to Kevin complain to the hostess about their seating arrangements for the past ten minutes, he could feel his patience with the other man beginning to wear thin. Paper thin. Tissue paper thin.

The hostess had unknowingly made a grave error in seating that evening, resulting in receiving a less than pleasant tirade from Kevin. She had tried to put Kevin and Connor into one of those romantic, half-circle booths where you sit close together, to which Kevin responded to by having a mini-fit where he huffed and moaned and told the girl, in about a hundred different ways, that he and Connor were absolutely not a couple and were not about to share a couple’s booth, as Kevin kept referring to it.

“I’m making it hard?” Kevin scoffed. “You’re the one who’s been acting so...so weird tonight, not me.”
With that, Connor felt his heart sink for about the tenth time that evening and the evening had barely even begun yet.

“You told me I could talk to you tonight, didn’t you?” Connor asked rather sadly as he picked up his menu, trying his best not to cry or yell or hit the man across from him. “Didn’t you?” He asked again, looking over the top of his menu to meet the other man’s eyes. Kevin’s eyes looked awfully confused and Connor honestly couldn’t really blame him for being so confused, but why he did have to act like such a dick on top of it?

“Yes, of course you can talk to me, Connor.” Kevin leaned back into his chair with a defeated sigh. “But, so far, all you’ve done is act secretive and quiet and not actually talk to me at all, about anything. If something’s on your mind, just spit it out so we can get this over with and go home.”

“Ouch,” Connor said bitterly and moved his eyes away from Kevin’s and back down to his menu, mostly so he wouldn’t break out crying. He wouldn’t give Kevin the satisfaction.

“What?” Kevin let out another exasperated sigh, overdramatically flopping his menu down to the table. “You’ve been acting strange ever since I left you this morning to watch Charlie by the pool. If I’d known it was going to spiral you into some kind of tailspin, I wouldn’t have asked you. Now will you please just tell me what’s really going on?”

“Funny you should say that, Kevin,” Connor said, his tone icy and sharp as he put his menu down again. “Because if I remember correctly, I’m the one who spent an entire year of my life asking you the same question whenever you were depressed, whenever you were acting ‘weird’ and not talking. You remember that, don’t you? Back when you’d spend days on end not even getting out of bed and whenever you did, you would just act ‘weird’. You remember that, right?”

Kevin looked positively stunned for a moment at Connor’s brutal honesty. He shook his head a little, almost as if trying to shake off the shock of Connor’s words. “That—that was different.”

“How was it different?” Connor asked. “Because, if my memory serves me correctly—and I think that it does—you never did tell me what was bothering you back then, did you? Not even after I asked you a thousand times, not even after I begged you. Even after all that, you still didn’t tell me, did you?”

Kevin just stared at Connor for a few moments, jaw slightly dropped, before anxiously turning back to his menu. “Look, they have an ostrich steak,” he cleared his throat and pointed to an item on the page. “That sounds interesting. Doesn’t that sound interesting?” He stuttered, his voice wavering a bit as he spoke. “Exotic. I guess that’s why it costs forty-five dollars, huh?”

“Don’t do that,” Connor chided with a shake of his head.

“Do what?”

“Do that thing that you always do whenever I’m trying to talk to you about something that you don’t like so you just change the subject on me, like you’re the king of the conversation and can just change it whenever you damn well please.” When Kevin didn’t answer right away, Connor took in a deep breath to try and reset, to calm himself down a little. “You know what, I told myself I wouldn’t get mad at you tonight, that I wouldn’t get upset, that I wouldn’t fight with you, and now, here we are, fighting.”

“So?” Kevin made a face. “What else is new?”

“Well, I’m sorry,” Connor said, directly and with earnest. “I’m sorry for snapping at you. I’m sorry
for acting a little...weird, tonight. I’m sorry for everything. Now can we please just go back to trying to enjoy each other’s company for a change and have a nice dinner together? This restaurant is so beautiful and you got all dressed up...I mean, really, Kevin, you look absolutely amazing tonight...and the food smells so delicious…” he trailed off, trying to think of the right words to say in order to fix this. “I don’t want to fight with you tonight, okay? Just...please, not tonight.”

Kevin’s expression was, for once, positively unreadable. He looked surprised at the heartfelt apology from the man sitting across from him, if not taken slightly aback. But there was something else there, too, swirling around in Kevin’s amber eyes. It was something Connor couldn’t exactly pinpoint.

Eventually, Kevin mumbled an unenthusiastic “fine” and turned back down to face his menu. After a moment, Connor did the same. They would need to order soon. And when Kevin didn’t look back up or say anything more on the subject for a little while, Connor figured the case was closed. Good. Now they could go back to pretending that they weren’t such screwed up, neurotic messes and attempt to salvage the evening. It was looking more and more like Connor would need to wait until after dinner to have the delicate conversation he wanted to have with Kevin. This wasn’t the right place. He thought it would be, but it wasn’t. There were too many people, too many distractions and not enough silence. They’d do it after dinner, Connor thought with finality. He’d find a nice, quiet spot in the resort where they could be alone and have their talk.

The waiter brought them a couple glasses of wine and warm bread and butter to snack on while they perused the dinner selections. Kevin didn’t want the wine, but Connor managed to convince him to enjoy just one glass. He didn’t argue much. In fact, he looked rather far-off and distracted.

“Did you really mean what you said before?” Kevin asked quietly, after a while had passed, without looking up from his menu. “About me looking amazing tonight?”

“Of course I meant it,” Connor snorted without missing a beat, as though the answer should have been obvious. “Have you looked at yourself in the mirror tonight?” He added without taking his eyes off of his own menu.

He’d thought he was being rather flattering to Kevin (and maybe just a tad bit flirty), but when the brunette didn’t reply, Connor looked back up to see what was the matter.

“Kev?” He tried to get his attention, but he could see the other man’s eyes were now lost in deep thought, as though trying to reconcile something within himself before speaking again. “Did my warmth and kindness stun you into silence?” Connor quipped as he gave Kevin’s leg a little kick underneath the table. “Kev? What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” Kevin stammered and shook his head, as though trying to shake off a slew of unwanted thoughts. He nervously downed a big gulp of his ice water before shakily placing it back down with a sigh. “I was just... thinking, that’s all.”

“Thinking about what?”

“Thinking about how I haven’t worn this suit in over five years,” Kevin swallowed hard as he spoke, pulling at the lip of his jacket. “And about how the last time I did, you told me the exact same thing. You told me how amazing I looked and how I should go look in the mirror for myself if I didn’t want to take your word for it.”

“I did?” Connor let out a sad laugh. “I don’t remember that.”

“Yeah, you did,” Kevin nodded. He then gave the redhead a very far-away looking smile. “Trust me, you did.”
“Well, aren’t I just the nicest date ever?” Connor praised himself with a happy little smirk as he flipped through the menu. “Always giving out the wonderful compliments to those with better genes than my own.”

“But, I, um, I was also thinking about how amazing you looked the last time I saw you wearing... this same outfit,” Kevin pointed at Connor, gesturing to his clothes. “It was at Arnold’s twenty-fifth birthday party at Dave and Busters in Provo. Do you remember?”

Connor just nodded dumbly for a moment as he tried to collect his bearings. He was trying not to panic at the fact that Kevin Price—Kevin Price—had just paid him a compliment. A rather sweet compliment. Kevin had actually said he thought Connor looked amazing. How could that be? Well, it couldn’t be. It couldn’t be because this Kevin, the one sitting across from him now, over purple candles and red wine and warm toasty bread, never paid him compliments like that anymore, sweet or otherwise.

No, that was the old Kevin who used to do things like that. The one who used to whisper sweet nothings into his ear at night as they’d slowly fall asleep in each other’s arms. The one who used to make him giggle mercilessly whenever they’d have tickle fights. The one who always told Connor how wonderful he looked, no matter what he was wearing. Back in Uganda, Connor could’ve been wearing a giant sheet over his head and Kevin still would’ve told him how stunningly gorgeous he looked. That was the old Kevin. The old Kevin who used to dance with him and kiss him and take baths with him and hold him and fool around with him and love him. That was another Kevin entirely, from another life. A life he didn’t have anymore. A life he honestly didn’t think he’d ever have again. That sure as heck wasn’t this Kevin. This Kevin could barely stand to be civil to him for more than five minutes without groaning or scowling or doing something to indicate his general displeasure with Connor’s presence. He didn’t know what to say or do with this newfound information about how amazing he looked, so he just did what he always did in times like these—ruin the moment.

“That was the time you hit me in the face with the piñata, right?” Connor stammered, not quite knowing what else to say. “A paper mâché Yoda, if I remember correctly.”

“Come on, that was an accident and you know it,” Kevin sighed, as though they’d been over this far too many times (and, indeed, they had). “They blindfolded me and told me to swing left, so I did. How was I supposed to know you would be standing right there?” He looked as though he was getting angry at Connor all over again about a stupid incident that no longer mattered. He fidgeted in his seat for a long moment before continuing. “The point is, I never got to tell you how... amazing I thought you looked that night because... because I was too angry with you, back then. So I’m saying it now, okay? The light blue really brings out your eyes and it goes really well with your skin and your... hair. Really well. The colors. They work. That’s all I got, okay?”

Connor struggled to even muster out a barely audible “thank you” to Kevin’s unexpected words. He just wasn’t used to Kevin acting like this—saying these kinds of things to him. It made him feel uneasy, because he hadn’t heard Kevin say things like that to him in such a long time. On the other hand, he was fairly certain his insides were physically melting at this point.

“You look amazing tonight, too, you know,” Kevin added softly, ruining any chance Connor had of not getting his hopes up, of not reading too much into this. No, now Connor McKinley was on his way to becoming a red and peach puddle of melted goo on the floor and it was all Kevin Price’s fault. “I just thought you should know that. I mean, just in case I never see you wear it again, that’s all. That’s the only reason I’m saying this right now. The likelihood is probably very slim that you’ll actually wear it again when we’re together, so I just wanted to get it out now before it’s too late,” he said the words quickly and Connor could tell he was already trying to take the gentle sentiment back,
ripping it away from him before it even had a chance to settle. “Don’t read too much into it, okay? I’m just saying what I should have said three years ago, that’s all.”

“Don’t worry,” Connor smiled sadly, trying to hold back tears and pretend that everything was still fine, that Kevin Price hadn’t just made him feel totally elated and completely destroyed at the same time. “I won’t.”

“And don’t think this changes anything about tonight either,” the brunette warned, trying to cover up his heartfelt words with colder ones. He always seemed to do that whenever things started to feel just a little bit warm between them. “This still isn’t a date or anything.”

“Definitely not,” Connor shook his head. And he meant it, too. Dates usually didn’t involve feeling like—this.

With that, Connor tried his best to push the thoughts out of his mind. That wasn’t why he was here tonight, after all. He was here for Kevin, to get Kevin to open up about his past. To help him. And that was the only reason.

After a few minutes of awkward tension, the pair of ex-missionaries eased back into making small talk about the beautiful decor and the ridiculous prices and who the Hell would eat a steak made out of ostrich, anyway?

Kevin had waited and waited throughout dinner for Connor to bring up whatever it was that he wanted to talk about, but it never seemed to come. He did, however, make an utter fool out of himself twice at the restaurant—once, for scaring the poor hostess about their seating arrangements. He just hoped they hadn’t spit in his food or something. And the other, for tripping over his words as he tried to give Connor a half-hearted compliment.

Despite all that, he’d eventually forced himself to relax and tried to enjoy himself a little, mostly at Connor’s prodding. He even had two glasses of red wine, albeit reluctantly. But deep down, he was still itching to know what was up with his not-date. He still cared about Connor and was growing more and more concerned that something was severely troubling him, something bad enough to turn the normally-witty redhead into a fumbling, inarticulate mess.

After dinner, the cab drove them back to the resort, where Kevin was honestly unsure about what to do next. Connor, on the other hand, seemed to already have a plan in mind. He took Kevin by the hand, much to his chagrin, and led him over to one of the swimming pool areas that sat in the middle of the resort. It was just after nine o’clock at night now and the moon was shining radiant and full against the blackened sky. The kids that were usually running around the resort were all either tucked into their beds or out at the parks. It was quiet. Especially for Disney World, of all places, it was very quiet. Too quiet. The lights scattered about the resort glowed a soft orange, illuminating little patches of darkness. The pool shimmered a fluorescent aquamarine, the lights underneath the water making it glisten more than usual. It was quite beautiful and it would have been very peaceful, had there not been so much tension emanating between himself and Connor.

The redhead brought him over to a secluded area near the pool, shaded by the dangling branches of a maple tree. He sat down on one of the hammocks they had set up about the grounds and reached out a hand, gesturing for Kevin to take a seat beside him.
“I’m not about to snuggle up in a hammock with you, Connor,” Kevin snapped with his usual scowl, taking a few steps back from the other man. “So if that’s what you’re after, I might as well just leave now.”

“I didn’t ask you to snuggle, you big baby,” Connor sighed. “Just come here, sit down with me,” he said, patting the spot next to him. “I just want to talk to you, that’s all. That is why we’re here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I thought it was, but then you never talked,” Kevin pointed out as he cautiously, with great, pained reluctance, sat down next to the redhead on the hammock. It felt so weird, sitting there like that, under the blackness of the night sky, surrounded by a hundred soft twinkling lights, the stillness of being alone like this in a massive resort, huddled beneath the swaying branches of a tree, in a hammock...with Connor—all of it was making him feel more than a little uneasy.

“I was going to bring it up at dinner, but it was too crowded. I thought it would be better if we talked like this, in private,” Connor explained as he moved back a bit on the hammock so he was lying down, with Kevin sitting by his feet. “You can come lay next to me if you want. I don’t bite.”

With that, Kevin shot up in haste, making the hammock suddenly sway rapidly, to and fro, jarring Connor’s body around roughly.

“This isn’t a date, remember?” Kevin barked at him. “That means no laying down. Got it?”

“Oh, okay, no laying down,” Connor exclaimed, hands raised in surrender. “God, you are so difficult sometimes.”

Kevin hesitantly took a seat back down on the hammock near Connor’s feet, as far away from the other man as possible. After a quiet pause hung between them for a moment, Kevin awkwardly cleared his throat. “So, what’s on your mind? I’d like to get upstairs by ten so I can tuck Charlie into bed.”

“Oh, um,” Connor stammered. “Okay, well, I just wanted to know if you, um,” he stumbled over his next few words, obviously struggling to find the right ones. Connor almost never struggled with words. It was his strong suit, after all. If there was anything Connor McKinley was good at, it was words. Not tonight though, apparently. Steeling himself, the redhead tried once again to make a proper sentence. “How—how have you been doing lately?”

Kevin raised a curious eyebrow at the odd, vague question and shrugged in response. “I don’t know. I’m doing fine, I guess. Why?”

Connor nodded, but looked as though he wasn’t satisfied with Kevin’s answer. “Okay, but are you really fine? Or are you just doing that Kevin thing where you lie to everyone who cares about you and say you’re fine but you’re actually not fine at all? Like not even a little bit.”

“Where is this even coming from?”

“Arnold tells me all the time how much he worries about you, Kevin. How lonely you seem all the time, how you hardly even laugh anymore, unless it’s with Charlie—”

“Arnold also has a life-sized cutout of Captain Kirk in his basement,” Kevin said disparagingly, trying his best to end this ridiculous conversation before it went too far. “He’s not exactly a reliable source.”

“He’s your best friend, Kevin.”
“Yeah, a best friend who owns three—count ’em three—Star Wars toasters and puts ketchup on pizza,” Kevin shuddered in disgust, as though that should answer that.

“Okay, regardless of his... eccentricities,” Connor went on, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Arnold still knows you better than anyone else in the whole world, Kevin. So if he says something’s wrong, then something’s wrong.”

“What's your point, Connor?”

Connor bit his lip and looked down, obviously struggling. “My point is... don't you ever...I don’t know, wish you had somebody in your life again?”

“I have Charlie,” Kevin deflected without missing a beat, even though he knew damn well that wasn't what Connor had meant.

“That's not the same thing, Kevin,” Connor said with a sigh. “And you know it’s not. She's your daughter. I meant someone like a partner, someone you can share your life with. I mean, don’t you want that? Like what Arnold and Naba have? Like...like what we used to have.”

Kevin bolted upright again at that, making Connor get tossed around by the swaying hammock. Backing away, he ran a trembling hand through his hair. “I’m not doing this with you.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Connor hopped up off the hammock and took Kevin's hands into his own to prevent him from leaving. “I wasn’t—-God, I wasn’t implying that you and I...that wasn’t what I was trying to get at, Kevin. You misinterpret everything I say because you’re always afraid of what I’m going to say. That isn’t what I meant.”

Kevin didn’t believe a word of it, so he just went ahead and ripped his hands away from Connor’s and turned to walk away. He was done with this. So done. At least, until Connor pulled out the only trick he had left in his book that would still work on Kevin.

“Charlie,” Connor blurted out as Kevin went to storm off.

Kevin stopped in his tracks at the mention of his daughter's name. Charlie? It had caught him totally off guard. He turned back around slowly, hesitantly, not quite sure yet which emotion would win—fear or curiosity. He took a few cautious steps towards Connor, who had now taken to sitting back down on the edge of the hammock, looking positively shaken up.

“What about Charlie?” Kevin asked, suspiciously.

“Well, she, um...she said some things to me this morning, Kevin, while I was watching her by the pool,” Connor divulged quietly as he looked down to face his shoes. “Things that were a little upsetting to hear. I just thought we should talk about it, that’s all. I wasn’t even sure how to bring it up with you or what I should say...,” he let out another defeated sigh. “I swear, I used to be better at this kind of thing.”

Kevin’s thoughts started racing a mile a minute in response to Connor's troubling words. “Alright, look, I know she’s a bit of an odd kid, alright? I’ll give you that,” he nodded as he ran a nervous hand through his hair. “I mean, she’s always had a bit of an active imagination and she tends to make things up sometimes and get curious about things that she probably shouldn’t be curious about yet, I mean she’s only five, right?”

“Kevin, that isn’t—”

“Listen, I’m sorry if she said anything weird or inappropriate to you or anything,” he apologized. “I'll
“No, no, you don’t understand,” Connor shook his head with a little laugh. “She’s a wonderful kid, Kevin. She’s so sweet and smart and I...I just love her, so much. That isn’t what I meant when I said her words...upset me.”

“Then what did you mean?” Kevin asked, not entirely sure he even wanted to hear the answer or not.

When Connor finally did tell him, a gigantic thud crashed to the bottom of his stomach. This wasn’t good. This wasn’t good at all.

~

“Come here, Kevin,” Connor said gently and patted the seat next to him on the hammock. He didn’t want to risk Kevin bolting off again in a panic, like he always tried to do whenever something made him uncomfortable. “Sit down here with me, okay?”

The brunette moved to sit down beside him on the hammock, looking distracted and numb. Well, at least he sat back down. That was a good sign, Connor thought. He’d honestly expected a bit more of a fight. The redhead could see now, however, that Kevin’s hands were starting to do that shaky, twitchy thing again, the thing they only did whenever Kevin got really upset about something. It crushed Connor’s heart a little, knowing that his words were most likely the cause.

Knowing that Kevin would probably not accept the gesture, but doing so anyway, Connor reached out and covered up Kevin’s trembling hands with one of his own paler ones, giving them a reassuring squeeze. Much to his surprise, Kevin didn’t flinch or yank himself away this time. He was probably in too much shock to care about the close contact Connor was initiating.

“It’s okay,” Connor soothed, rubbing his hand back and forth over Kevin’s. “Try to relax, alright? You’re starting to shake a little. It’s just me. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“It just happens sometimes,” Kevin whispered, looking down at his hands, which were now covered by Connor’s. “I can’t always control it.”

“I know,” Connor said, his tone deliberately softer than usual. He daringly moved his other arm up to wrap around Kevin’s shoulders, pulling him closer into his side. He thought for sure Kevin would jerk away from the gesture of closeness, but, much to Connor’s surprise, he didn’t.

“What did you say before?” Kevin asked again, even though they both knew damn well what Connor had said.

“I said,” Connor went on, his voice calm and gentle, “that Charlie said some unsettling things to me while I was watching her by the pool this morning. She saw Chris and James kissing and started saying things like ‘boys who do that together go to Hell when they die’ and ‘it’s a sin for boys to do that together’ and ‘boys should be with girls because that’s what God wants’...you see where I’m going here.”

“It’s my mom,” Kevin closed his eyes with a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. “She babysits Charlie a lot when I’m at work. I had a feeling she’s been saying those kinds of things to her.”

Connor nodded sadly at that. “Look, I’ll talk to her about it, okay? I’m sorry she said those things to you—”

“Kevin,” Connor interrupted with a sad smile. “I wasn’t offended by what she said to me. I know they were your mother’s words, not Charlie’s. Just let me finish, okay?” When Kevin nodded, he
continued. “I tried to explain to her that it’s okay for two people of the same sex to love each other, that’s it’s natural and just how God made some people, that some people were born different and that’s okay.”

“I really wish you hadn’t told her those things,” Kevin groaned and buried his face into his hands. “I just… don’t want her repeating that kind of thing to my mom or at Church or to her friends—”

“As much as I disagree with you, we can talk about that another time, okay?” Connor said, trying not to get too worked up. “That’s not what I’m trying to get at here.”

“It’s not?”

“No,” Connor said, allowing his voice to return to it’s softer tone. “She also told me that your mother has been saying some… other things… to her,” he trailed off, not quite sure how to say what he wanted to say. “About you, Kevin. Things about you.”

Kevin’s eyes widened. “About me?”

“Yes, about you, about your… sexuality.” The last word came out as sort of a whisper. He knew all too well just how sensitive Kevin was about that kind of thing and he didn’t want to alarm him. He watched Kevin close his eyes and take in a big gasp of air. Connor strengthened his grip on the man’s shoulders, just in case he got it in his head to run off again. He knew it was only a matter of time before he would try again to escape.

“Your mother has been telling Charlie that… I guess while you were at BYU, that well… she—she said that ‘the men at school fixed you’, Kevin,” Connor blurted out, not knowing any other way to say it. “Those were her exact words. She told me that the men at school ‘fixed you’ and made you ‘not gay anymore’.” He moved a gentle hand up and down Kevin’s back, hoping the motion would soothe him. He could feel Kevin’s breathing becoming more and more ragged by the second. “Can you tell me what she might have meant by that? Because if it means what I think it means, then you and I have a lot to talk about, don’t you think?”

“No, no… I really don’t want to do this, Connor,” Kevin shook his head with a hard swallow. “I already told you, I’m fine. What’s done is done. I can’t undo anything that’s happened to me, so I really don’t see any point in talking about it,” he reasoned before moving to stand up again. “Look, it’s getting really late. I think I’m just going to go upstairs and put Charlie to—”

But before he could finish the sentence, Connor had already pulled him back down, causing the brunette to fall back onto the hammock with a yelp.

“Not this time, Kevin,” Connor announced, strong and gentle, in his best District Leader voice. “This time, I’m not letting you go until you tell me the truth.”

“Let me up. Let me up right now,” Kevin protested and began fighting against Connor’s weight. “This isn’t funny anymore. Let me up.”

“No,” Connor shook his head. “I’m here to listen and to help you but I can only do that if you cooperate. Do you understand?”

“Why do you even care?” Kevin laughed bitterly in Connor’s face as he attempted to break free from the restraint, but Connor (who was freakishly strong, when he wanted to be) just held him down in place, pinned against the hammock.

“Is that even a real question?” Connor asked, bewildered at how dense Kevin could be sometimes. He tightened his grip on Kevin’s shoulders when he felt the other man try and sit up again. “I happen
to care about you, Kevin. I care about you a lot, in fact. I’ve always cared about you, more than you could ever possibly comprehend. You’re just too thick-headed to see it, that's all.”

“Care about me or just want to get in my pants?” Kevin snapped and tried once again to push Connor’s weight off of him, unsuccessfully.

“Well, I always want to get in your pants, but I happen to care about you too, you know,” he said evenly, just to lighten the mood. But when Kevin looked positively scandalized, he just rolled his eyes. “Relax, Kevin. That was a joke. Remember those? Now will you please stop fighting me and just sit still for a minute so we can talk?”

“Will you just get off of me?” He growled. “This isn't funny anymore. I’m not laughing.”

“I'm not letting you up until you talk to me, so unless you want to spend all night with me in this hammock, I suggest you cooperate.”

“This is assault,” Kevin spat out, as Connor ever so slightly relinquished his grip on Kevin’s shoulders. “I should have you arrested for this.”

“What the Hell happened to you, Kevin?” Connor whispered sadly, ignoring the empty threat. “Just please, for the love of God, tell me what happened to you.”

“You want to know what ‘happened to me’, Connor?” Kevin spat angrily, sitting up a little closer so he was right up against his face. Connor could tell the other man was starting to lose whatever last vestige of control he'd been clinging onto this whole time. “Do you really want to know what happened to me?”

“Calm down, Kevin,” he tried to soothe. “You don’t have to—”

“You happened to me!” Kevin screamed. “That’s what ‘happened to me’, Connor—you happened!”

Connor could feel the man’s chest rising and falling beneath him, his breaths growing increasingly rapid and short. A few rouge droplets of spit were landing on Connor's cheek as he yelled, but he made no move to wipe them away.

“You need to calm down and take a deep breath now, okay?” Connor instructed gently. “You're starting to—”

“I hate you!” Kevin just screamed instead, spitting in Connor’s face. He no longer seemed to care about the fact that his manic cries were echoing throughout the grounds, a harsh juxtaposition against the serene stillness of the night.

“I know you don’t mean that,” Connor said, trying to sound calm. “You’re just trying to make me mad so I’ll let you up. Well, it’s not going to work. Not this time.”

“You ruined my life, Connor!” Kevin went on shouting anyway, panicked gasps now escaping his throat. “Before I met you, everything was fine! You hear me? Fine! I was fine! Everything was fine until I met you! I hate you!”

The hurtful words stung like daggers, a thousand tiny knives piercing Connor’s skin. Even though he knew, in his heart, that Kevin didn’t mean them. They still stung, regardless. It hurt. Everything hurt. The man lying beneath him, once so proud and self-assured, now just looked broken, unravelling to pieces right before Connor's eyes. He could feel every slight twitch, every sharp hitch of breath, every labored gasp. This wasn’t at all how this conversation was supposed to go. He silently prayed that this was only the beginning, that Kevin would eventually calm down enough to explain the truth
and let it out, in a more productive way than this.

“I hate you,” Kevin just repeated the harsh words over and over again, choking on them a little each time, gasping violently for air. His breaths were getting shorter and shorter now, hard and labored. “I hate you. I hate—”

“You don’t mean that,” Connor said. “You’re just upset. Try to breathe for me, okay?”

“I can't,” Kevin whimpered. He was still wriggling around beneath Connor’s grasp, trying to get up. “Let me up!” He cried out, trying to push Connor off of him. “I can't breathe, Connor. I can't… breathe.”

Connor pulled back a bit, to allow Kevin to collect himself and get some air. He watched as the man beneath him writhed and trembled, desperate guttural gasps escaping his throat, one after the other. Watching him lay there like that—fragile, broken, falling apart in his arms—well, it nearly snapped Connor’s heart in two. He couldn’t remember the last time he'd seen Kevin Price look so vulnerable.

“Shhh,” Connor cooed as he ran a slow hand through Kevin’s hair. “It’s okay. Everything’s okay, sweetheart. Just relax and take in a slow, deep breath. Can you do that for me?”

“I can't,” Kevin choked, shaking his head. “I can't breathe. It hurts. It hurts too much.”

“Yes, you can, sweetie. You do it all the time,” Connor urged, his tone calm and patient, as though he were trying to talk a child down from a tantrum. “Now take long, slow breaths with me, okay? In,” he said and mimicked a long breath in before exhaling out, “and out. Do that five more times with me, okay? In—”

Kevin did as Connor instructed and, after a few minutes, his breathing returned to a somewhat normal rhythm. He was still shaken up, but at least his breaths were not as rapid as they had been before.

“You're alright,” Connor assured him as he looked down into his wide, frightened brown eyes. “I'm right here. You're safe. Everything’s alright. It’s all alright.”

Nothing was alright, but Connor still clung onto the fragile hope that, by the end of the night, it would be. That Kevin would be.

Naba and Arnold were busy getting ready for bed that evening. Harrison and Charlie were bouncing around the room, running every which way, shrieking as they played God-knows-what. It sort of resembled tag, but without any of the structure. The plan was for Charlie to stay in their room that night, just in case Kevin and Connor needed some alone time after their not-date. They’d watch a Disney movie all together and have some popcorn, to try and help Charlie fall asleep without her daddy there. They knew she always had trouble falling asleep without Kevin there to hold her and tuck her in and read her a bedtime story. Arnold was trying to relax and concentrate on enjoying some quality time with the kids and Naba, but his mind just kept wandering to thoughts of Kevin and his hopes for what might happen for his longtime buddy that evening. He knew it was a long shot, but a best friend could still hope, right?

“When’s my daddy coming home?” Charlie asked for about the hundredth time as she climbed up on the bed next to Arnold. “I want to show him my ring pop.” She held up her hand to show Arnold the
hard candy on her finger.

“Soon, sweetie,” he said, ruffling her hair. “But you’ll probably be fast asleep by then.”

“I don’t think so,” Charlie shook her head. “I’m going to stay up all night until my daddy gets home. Then, I’m going to show him my ring pop. It’s cherry. My daddy loves cherry.”

“Oh, sure, but you’re staying in our room tonight, remember?” Arnold gently reminded her. “So you might need to show him in the morning. We’ll wrap it up for you, okay?”

“Why am I staying in here tonight?”

“Because—“

“Why?” She chirped again. That was her word of the day today, apparently—why?

“Because…” Arnold faltered as he tried to think of a good fake reason. “Because this is where the popcorn lives.” He grinned and held up the bowl of popcorn. Charlie opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off. “Now go get your jammies on, okay? We’re gonna watch Moana in a minute.”

“Moana!” She cried out excitedly, jumping up and down in glee. “Yay! Moana’s my favorite! Moana’s my favorite!”

“I know it is.” Naba beamed down at the little girl as she held out her tiny pink pajamas. “That’s why we picked it, silly. Now go put these on and we’ll get the movie started, okay?”

As Charlie giddily scampered into the bathroom, Arnold glanced at his watch. “It’s ten o’clock now and they’re still not back yet,” he said, scooting back against the bedframe and flicking on the television. “They must be having a pretty good time.”

“I hope so,” Naba said with a sigh. “I worry they are not though.”

Arnold snorted. “Yeah, well, with those two,” he paused to toss a few popcorn kernels into his mouth. “I wouldn't be surprised. But I still hope they’re at least trying to have fun.”

“I saw Connor this morning by the playground,” Naba went on as she tied a bathrobe around her waist before sitting down next to Arnold on the bed. “He was crying. He was trying to hide it, but I could tell he had been crying.”

“Crying?” Arnold murmured. “Hmm. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Connor cry. Oh, well, maybe that one time, when he got smacked in the face with that piñata.” He snort-chuckled at the memory as he grabbed a handful of popcorn and shoveled into his mouth. “Man, his nose was bleeding everywhere.”

“I still think you should not have gone around taking bets on how their date will end up,” Naba chided him with a knowing look and nudge to the belly. But her smile was warm and playful and inviting, much as it always was, especially when she looked at her husband. “I just don’t think it’s right, betting on our friends happiness like this.”

“Hey, now,” Arnold defended. “That didn’t stop you from participating, did it? You dropped 10 dollars on ‘ain’t never gonna happen’. I’m personally going with, ‘God, I hope so’ because he’s my best friend and all.”

Naba rolled her eyes. “You’re horrible.”
“Come on, I’m just trying to have a little fun,” he exclaimed as he cuddled closer into Naba’s side. “Why is everyone acting so serious? We’re at Disney World, for crying out loud. This is supposed to be fun, remember?”

“Well, we shall see, won’t we?” Naba smiled as Charlie came running out of the bathroom and hopped up onto their laps. “Moana!”

“Why are you doing this?” Kevin asked, looking so confused, as though dumbfounded as to why Connor would still be trying to help him after his angry outburst. “I just said horrible things to you and you’re still...here, touching me. Stop touching me.”

“I can’t do that,” Connor said gently. “And you were having a panic attack, Kevin. It’s nothing you need to be sorry for.”

“Why are you doing this?” He pleaded again, wriggling again beneath Connor’s grasp. “Let me up!”

“Why do you think I’m doing this?” Connor asked as he slowly carded a hand through Kevin’s hair, the silky locks gliding through his fingers with ease.

“I don’t—I don’t know,” Kevin choked. His voice sounded painfully reluctant and Connor could tell he was trying his best not to look him in the eyes.

“I think you do,” Connor nodded as he continued to move his hand across his scalp. “I think you know exactly why I'm doing this.”

“Can I please just get up now?” He begged, pathetic and tired. “Look, I’m sorry I yelled at you. I’m sorry I said those things to you. I’m sorry for everything I’ve ever done to you, okay? But I just really need to go upstairs and tuck Charlie into bed now, alright? I need to go to bed now, please... I just want to go to bed—”

“No,” Connor whispered and continued to run his fingers through Kevin’s hair, hoping the rhythmic motion would calm him down enough to talk. “You still haven’t told me what happened to you, so I can’t let you up yet.”

“Do you really want to know?” Kevin asked softly, his eyes tired and worn and gleaming with an emotion Connor wasn’t sure of. It was something beyond sadness. What was the emotion beyond sadness? Connor was certain now that his heart was positively in shambles. Whatever had happened to Kevin, whatever information he was about to divulge—Connor knew they’d be in for a rough ride. But he willing to go on that ride—together, with Kevin. His Kevin.

“I really want to know,” Connor assured him with as much warmth and love and compassion as he could possibly manage. “I don’t just want to know. I need to know.”

Kevin nodded slowly, seeming to finally accept Connor’s heartfelt plea as the truth, but he still made no move to say anything further. He looked frozen in place, scared. After a few moments of gazing down into Kevin’s eyes—eyes that looked entirely unsure of what to do next, Connor nodded in finality and lifted himself off of Kevin, setting him free. Well, not all the way free. He still kept his hands securely attached to Kevin’s shoulders. Connor scooted back on the hammock and slowly laid
down. He silently gestured for the other man to come closer to him, so they could lay down together.

“I don’t want to lay like that,” Kevin whispered, his voice barely audible. “Not—not with you.”

Connor sat back up and delicately brushed a stray piece of hair out of Kevin’s eyes. “I promise, it’ll be more comfortable than me pinning you down like a wrestler,” he tried to joke with his usual wry smile, but the mood just wouldn’t permit it. Kevin just looked so frightened, as though moving to lay down next to Connor might mean something. Connor knew Kevin didn’t want it to mean something. The fact crushed his heart, but he wouldn’t let that deter him from doing what he needed to do. “Just lay down with me, okay? We’re just going to talk, that’s all. It doesn’t mean anything, Kevin. Sometimes, platonic friends help each other like this and it’s okay. It doesn’t have to mean anything you don’t want it to mean. I promise.”

With fearful eyes and a weak nod, Kevin reluctantly obliged, allowing Connor to lay on his back and bring Kevin’s head down to rest comfortably atop his chest. The brunette’s lower body was cradled snugly into Connor’s side now, with one of Kevin’s legs wrapped slightly around one of Connor’s. They hadn’t been this close to one another since the last night he’d visited Kevin at BYU—over six years ago.

“I’ve never done this before,” Kevin whispered into Connor’s chest. “I—I don’t even know where to start.”

“I don’t either,” Connor said, because it was the truth. He began to run his fingers through the messy brunette locks that were now cascaded over his chest. Every once in a while, he’d feel Kevin flinch at the touch, but he tried to ignore it as best he could. He just kept on carding his fingers through Kevin's hair, regardless, in the same calming motion, twirling his fingers around the soft strands and gently massaging his scalp.

“I have a feeling it might have started when we got back home from Uganda and you came out to your parents,” Connor said, eventually. “Why don’t we start there, okay?”

“That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done in my entire life, so we can probably start there.” Kevin let out a bitter laugh, one that sounded dark and full of contempt.

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“Coming out to your parents wasn’t stupid, Kevin,” Connor corrected him. “It was necessary.”

“I still can’t believe I was actually naïve enough to believe you and Arnold when you told me everything would be okay, that they’d come around, that they’d understand,” he sneered, shaking his head in disgust. “What a load of crap that was.”

“I said eventually, you know,” Connor reminded him. “You never waited long enough to see. I still think they would’ve come around, eventually, but you never even gave them a chance.”

“I did give them a chance,” Kevin spat, shifting around anxiously against Connor’s side, trying to shuffle out of his grasp. “Forget it, Connor. Just forget it. You wouldn't understand.”

“Right, how silly of me,” Connor said, as though he were actually considering Kevin's thoughtless comment. “Of course I wouldn't understand. I mean, it wasn't as though I'd spent my entire life hiding who I truly was, lying to my family and friends. I didn’t grow up in the Mormon Church, surrounded by people who didn’t want me to be gay. I didn't hate myself every goddamn day for having gay thoughts or wake up every night from Hell dreams in a panic, feeling scared and guilty. You're right, Kevin, how could I possibly understand what you were going through? How stupid of me.”
Kevin just sighed. “You know what I meant.”

“No, I don’t,” Connor said. “Are you forgetting how hard it was for me to tell my very religious, single mother that her only child was gay? She didn’t exactly throw a party when I came out.”

“I know that, Connor,” Kevin said, obviously trying to sound somewhat sympathetic. “I was there, remember? But you don’t under—.”

“My mother wouldn’t talk to me for two weeks after I told her about us,” Connor reminded him. “Remember how I cried and cried when I thought she was never going to speak to me again? But then, one day, she did. She sat me down and told me how much she loved me, how she’d love me no matter what I was or what I did, even if she couldn’t understand it.”

“Well, your mom is a good person,” Kevin said, quietly.

“Yeah, she is,” Connor nodded. “It was hard at first, though. For my mom to get comfortable with it and all. But we’re actually really close now,” he added with a sad little shrug. “She still asks about you sometimes, you know.”

Kevin’s eyes widened at that. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Connor said with a smile as he ran a slow hand all the way down Kevin’s back, before bringing it back up again, tenderly, and with great care. “She always says, ‘when are you going to get back together with that Kevin? He was always such a nice boy.’” He chuckled a little and he could even see a little smile forming on Kevin’s lips. “She asks me how you’re doing sometimes, things like that. I taught her how to use FaceTime before I left on this trip, just in case she wanted to see my face while I was gone. Anyway, when I FaceTimed her the other day, I told her all about Charlie and how much she adores you and how you’re basically the best dad in the entire world,” he said, pulling Kevin into a squeeze. “Because you are.”

“That’s a bit of an overstatement,” Kevin chuckled, his tone humble. Modest, even.

“I don’t think it is,” Connor shook his head. “Not at all. You’re an incredible father, Kevin. You should give yourself some credit.”

“Thanks,” Kevin whispered. He was looking away from Connor, out towards the pool, with an unreadable expression on his face.

“My mom asked me… well, she wanted to know if maybe she could say hi to you and Charlie before the trip is over, if you don’t mind too much.”

“Oh,” Kevin raised his brows, surprised. “I mean, sure, yeah. Of course.”

“I thought maybe tomorrow, when we’re all at the park or something.” he trailed off. “I could set up a video call or something. I mean, I know we aren’t close anymore or anything, but it would make the old lady happy.” Connor could feel Kevin gripping onto him a bit tighter now, almost as though he were trying to give him a reassuring squeeze, but was holding back still, afraid of what the intimate gesture might mean.

“I’m sorry she isn’t doing well, Connor,” Kevin closed his eyes and shook his head, looking as though he might break out crying at any moment. “I really am… so, so sorry.”

“Shh. I know that,” he hushed him. “It’ll be okay.”

Connor closed his eyes and tried his damndest not to think about his mother. His sick, ailing mother
who’d never given up on him, no matter what. But tonight wasn’t about him or his mother. It was about Kevin. His Kevin. And only Kevin.

The two men were quiet for a while after that, laying together in the hammock, breathing slowly, lightly touching each other. Kevin was no longer struggling against Connor’s strength to escape. No, he looked much too tired and weary for that now. Connor’s arm was wrapped snugly around one of Kevin’s shoulders, the brunette pulled close into his side. Kevin’s head fit perfectly into the nook where Connor’s shoulder met his chest, one of his tanned arms draped across the redhead's middle. And Connor’s face was so close to Kevin’s hair, he could smell the familiar scents of minty shampoo and aftershave emanating off of him. Most of the earlier anger and tension had dissipated by now, leaving behind a strange kind of understanding in its wake. Connor wouldn’t exactly call it comfortable. It wasn’t comfortable, but it was quiet and still and patient and there was some kind of unspoken connection he knew they both felt. On some level, he knew Kevin Price wouldn’t be trying to run away anymore.

“My parents had three kids,” Kevin spoke up after a while. “I was the oldest, so they were always a little harder on me, you know? They wanted me to set a good example for my little brother and sister, so they could look up to me and everything.”

“They did look up to you,” Connor said with a nostalgic smile, remembering Kevin’s siblings and how much they positively adored their big brother.

“I guess,” Kevin shrugged.

“Oh, please,” Connor rolled his eyes. “I remember how Jack used to look at you, like you were his hero. Even after you came out, he still looked at you like that, you know. He always used to tell me how he wanted to be just like his big brother Kevin when he grew up. It was sickeningly sweet.”

Kevin waved him off, pretending as though the thought of his little brother loving and admiring him wasn’t making his heart feel all warm and fuzzy, but Connor knew better.

“I remember waking up the next morning, the day after I told my parents about us,” Kevin said, continuing on with his story. “I walked out into the kitchen for breakfast, somehow forgetting that they knew. Can you believe that?” He let out a sad little laugh. “I’d actually forgotten that I’d told them. Just for a minute, I’d somehow managed to forget. I sat down at the table, smiling, ready to dig into this big delicious pile of French toast my mom made for us. It was dripping with syrup, just the way I like it. And that’s when I saw it—this look in my parents’ eyes...this look of just...disappointment and disgust. No one had ever looked at me that way before, Connor. Because I was the best. I was always the best. But then suddenly, my parents were looking at me as though I’d just shot the family dog or something. Because I loved you,” he admitted softly. “That was the only reason...because I loved you.”

Connor felt a small sting, deep in his heart, at Kevin’s use of the word loved in the past tense, as though he was outright telling Connor that he no longer loved him. It had been an assumption, of course, all these years since they’d broken up, that Kevin no longer loved him. But actually hearing him say the word like that, saying that he loved him, as though it were no longer true, felt all too final and permanent for Connor. He closed his eyes and tried to shake away the negative, selfish thoughts beginning to bombard his brain, disrupting his concentration. He wasn’t there to get Kevin back or to make Kevin fall in love with him again. That wasn’t why he was there. He was there to help him, to listen to him, and nothing more.

“My appetite kind of went away after that,” Kevin went on. “I just felt sick to my stomach, like I might suddenly throw up or something. And every day after that was exactly the same. Every day, they looked at me like that, as though I was just...the worst son on the entire planet. As though all of
the good things I’d ever done in my entire life suddenly didn’t matter anymore, as though being gay, being with you, just cancelled them all out or something. I couldn’t understand it,” he shook his head, wiping away a lone tear trying to escape his eye. “It just didn’t make any sense to me.”

A while passed and Kevin began to absentmindedly play with the hem on the edge of the hammock, seemingly distant now, drowning in his own thoughts and memories. Connor had a feeling he wasn’t done talking just yet, though, so he silently continued to smooth back Kevin’s hair beneath his palm, letting him know he was still there, listening.

“You know, even after all that,” he went on, his tone soft and quiet and more than a bit shaky. “I still wanted to be with you, Connor. I thought I could handle it. I really did. I thought I had enough strength inside of me to get up every day, look them straight in the eye and say...’I’m gay and I love my boyfriend. I’m proud of who I am and I really don’t give a damn what you think’, ” Kevin whispered, a heartbreaking smile on his face. “I thought it would be worth it, you know? That being with you, that being together, that being happy...I thought it would be worth all the judgment and all the pain.”

“But it wasn’t,” Connor said, blinking back unshed tears, as he continued to card a tender hand through Kevin’s hair. His words were quiet and honest—brutally honest—but they weren’t laced with even a trace amount of animosity. He hadn’t said them in the cruel, disparaging way he could have said them, had that been what he was going for. But that wasn’t what he was going for. Not tonight. Tonight, he was going for kind and patient and understanding and all of the other amazing things Connor McKinley used to be, back when he and Kevin were together.

“No, Connor,” he shook his head, a sad, tired sigh escaping his throat. “You don’t understand. It was worth it,” he affirmed, gripping tightly onto Connor’s middle. “For a long time, it was...so, so worth it.”

Confused as to what he might have meant by that, Connor kept his focus on Kevin as he watched him try and think through his next words. Somehow, Connor had a feeling that the next few words to come out of his mouth weren’t going to be easy ones to say. The redhead moved his hand down from Kevin’s scalp, in favor of running it up and down his arm, letting him know that it was okay for him to take his time, to think through his thoughts in full before speaking, that it was okay to be having this conversation in the first place—a conversation they should have had years ago, but were both too stubborn and selfish to do so.

“You said you wanted to know what happened to me at school,” Kevin eventually whispered into the redhead’s chest. Connor silently answered the question by continuing his rhythmic caresses, hoping they would serve to ease some of Kevin’s frazzled nerves.

“I’d like it if you would tell me,” Connor said gently, after Kevin was quiet for a while. “For your own sake.”

He could feel Kevin’s fingernails digging deep into his sides now, but he made no effort to remove them. He was okay with being Kevin’s stress ball. He was willing to do that.

“Tell me,” he encouraged again. “It’ll make you feel better, I promise.”

Kevin nodded and readied himself to speak, taking in a deep breath.

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*Here goes nothing*, Kevin thought to himself, trying his best not to panic or throw up or tremble or cry. It was only Connor, after all. It was just him and Connor. And even throughout all of their ups
and downs, Kevin knew, deep down, that Connor did care about him. He’d just said so himself. And his request to listen to Kevin’s plight seemed genuine enough and from a good place and, for Kevin, after all the years he’d spent holding it in, keeping it down, buried underneath everything, deep inside of himself, under blankets and blankets of scars and denial—well, even Kevin had to admit that it might feel just a little bit better to let some of it out. Keeping it inside, all the time, and pretending everything was okay when it wasn’t, was downright exhausting, and it was only getting harder and harder to do, especially around Connor McKinley.

“Tell me,” Connor said again, never letting his right hand fall from its place in Kevin’s hair, while his left worked it’s way up and down Kevin’s arm. Connor was really good at this kind of thing, Kevin thought to himself. Even though he didn’t want to think about it, he couldn’t help but think about it. He wanted to think it was disgusting, being touched like this. That it was impure and revolting. He wanted to believe that two men, being together like this, that feeling like this, was sinful and wrong. But, no matter how much Kevin wanted to feel repulsed by it, all he felt was the ever-pressing desire to melt further and further into it. Connor’s touches were comforting, mesmerizing even. And Kevin honestly couldn't recall the last time he’d been touched like this.

Kevin took in a deep breath and told Connor all about Joey, his roommate back in college who had snitched on him to the Honor Code office. He told him what Joey had said to him the day he found out about Kevin and Connor’s relationship—about how disgusted he’d looked as he was saying it. He told him how he just cried and cried after Joey slammed the door in his face, claiming that he “couldn’t be roommates with someone like that”—with someone like Kevin.

As he was speaking, he could feel a flurry of butterflies flying around his tummy, filling him up with feelings. Connor had given him another tender squeeze. That was why. And it all just felt so nice, being held like this. With each touch and gentle squeeze, it felt as though Connor was silently letting him know that everything was okay, that doing this was okay. The touches were familiar to Kevin, intensely so, for he’d received them quite often when he and Connor were together. He’d missed them. He’d missed them terribly. He just hadn’t realized how much he’d missed them, not until he’d gotten a taste of them once again. It had been years since he’d been touched like this. Such a long a time. Too long a time. He felt a deep, inconsolable ache inside of him as Connor gently massaged his scalp with one hand and ran a tender hand down his back with the other. Oh, how he’d missed Connor. How he’d missed touching him and being touched by him. And how Kevin loved being touched like this. How he loved it when Connor touched him like this. It felt nice and safe and warm and he couldn’t believe that this is what he’d been so afraid of all these years.

“What happened next?” Connor asked, snapping Kevin out of his inner thoughts.

He took in a deep breath and told Connor what happened next, what happened after Joey reported him to the Honor Code office. He told him all about how he was forced to humiliate himself by having a hearing in front of the school board about his “actions”. About how his parents had sat there in the back row of the student court, heads hung low in shame. In shame of Kevin. In shame of their Kevin. He told Connor about how they took him out to dinner that night, where they did nothing but berate him and scold him and call him awful names and threaten him. He told Connor about how he couldn’t even eat any of his dinner that night because he felt as though he might throw up at any moment. He told him about the devastated look on Jack’s face as he watched his parents yell at his big brother, the one person he’d always looked up to, who he’d thought could do anything he set out to do. He told him everything. About how he had to go to counselling at the Honor Code office and about how his grades had started to drop after that. He told him about how the other students would whisper behind his back, push him, shove him, try to save him. He told him everything. Well—almost everything.

“I still thought it was worth it, though,” Kevin said after he finished, his body shuddering
involuntarily as he sniffled into Connor’s chest. He could feel how wet Connor’s shirt had gotten now, from his tears. The light blue button down shirt the redhead was wearing, the one Kevin had always thought looked so perfect on him, was now completely soaked through. Kevin knew the other man wouldn’t mind, but it was still embarrassing nonetheless. He continued on, regardless, because Connor deserved to know the truth. “But even with my parents yelling at me and all the kids picking on me and harassing me and trying to save me…I still thought it was worth it, Connor… that being together, that being with you, was worth all that.”

“Really?” Connor asked, sounding surprised. Kevin could tell his voice was wavering a bit. “You did?”

“Of course I did,” Kevin laughed a heartbreakingly sad laugh, as though it should have been obvious. As though Connor should already know how Kevin really feels about him. But, of course, how could he know? He couldn’t know. It was impossible for Connor to know. Kevin was so good at keeping it a secret, wasn’t he? He allowed himself to nuzzle his cheek further into Connor’s shirt. “You were the best thing that had ever happened to me, Connor. You made me... God, you made me so happy. Always, so happy. Every night, I’d go to sleep thinking about how lucky I was to have you, to have my sweet, smart, amazing Connor McKinley with the soft red hair and adorable freckles and the softest skin I’d ever touched in my life. No matter what happened to me at school or with my parents, I knew that having you would make up for all that. You always knew how to cheer me up. Always. Just talking to you… just seeing your face… that was all I ever needed to be happy.”

Until it wasn’t, a small, nagging voice echoed in Kevin’s head. He knew it was inevitable now. He would have to tell Connor the rest of the story, no matter how much it pained him, no matter how much he didn’t want to. Connor deserved to know the whole truth. He really did. Kevin was starting to realize that now. He’d been selfish and cruel to keep the truth hidden all these years, leaving Connor in dark to wonder what he’d done wrong, how he’d messed it up, why he’d lost Kevin’s love. Connor didn’t deserve that. He didn’t deserve that at all. He deserved to know the truth.

“Look,” Kevin started with a shaky breath, “I don’t want to drag this out any longer than it needs to be, okay?”

Connor could tell by the look in Kevin’s eyes and this was going to be the toughest part of the story for him to tell. He looked absolutely terrified, a terror from his very core, but also oddly determined.

“Take as long as you need, Kevin,” Connor said softly as he caressed Kevin’s scalp, twisting and turning the locks of hair around in his fingers. “We have all night. I’m not going anywhere.”

Kevin nodded and collected his bearings for a moment before continuing on. “My parents were upset with me after I got in trouble at school. I knew that. There were tons of phone calls and lectures and talking to and whatever. Fine. I could deal with that. But, then, one day, this guy just… shows up at my door, claiming to be some kind of therapist or something. It didn’t take me very long to figure out exactly what kind of ‘therapy’ this guy was pedaling. He was a religious therapist. A Mormon who wanted to ‘save me’. And I wanted nothing to do with it, so I told him to go away, that I never wanted to see him or anyone like him ever again.”

“Good,” Connor nodded fiercely. If there was one thing Connor McKinley hated most in this world —it was homophobes. “So you told him off. Then what?”

“But then he just refused to leave until I heard him out. And I was tired, Connor. I was so tired of fighting. I just didn’t care anymore, you know? I was done fighting. So I let him in. I let him talk. I let him go on and on about what a great Mormon I used to be and how my parents used to be so
proud of me. Then he told me that unless I agreed to go to this ridiculous ‘therapy’ bullshit,” he sighed sadly as the word came out of his mouth. “That my parents were going to cut me off.”

“Cut you off?” Connor asked, confused. “What does that even mean?”

“It would’ve meant no more money, no more college tuition, no more support from them whatsoever.” He closed his eyes and took in large a breath of air. “They also told me I wouldn’t be welcomed back home anymore after my first year of school, if I didn’t at least give it a try. If I didn’t agree to see the doctor for this… treatment.”

“Jesus Christ,” Connor cursed, a breath hitching in his throat. He was quiet for a moment, not quite certain what he should say next. “So what did you tell him then?” He asked, already knowing the answer.

“I told him I’d go,” Kevin whispered, shamefully looking down and biting his lower lip. “That I’d… try. I mean, I wasn’t really going to try. I was just going to go along with it for show, you know? Just to get my parents off my back. Just to get them to maybe be proud of me again. I didn’t think it would hurt as much as it did. I didn’t think it was going to be as bad as it was. I swear, I didn’t.”

Connor nodded sadly, sitting in contemplative silence for a moment, thinking. “So Charlie’s words…those things she said to me—”

“—they’re true,” Kevin finished for him with a nod. “They’re all true. I went to therapy for months. I mean, months. And each time I went there I thought…it’s okay, this is okay, because it’s only for now, it’s only for right now…” Connor could feel Kevin’s hands begin to shake again, like they had been when they first started talking. “I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone or hurt you or anything, I swear. I just didn’t want my parents to hate me anymore. I didn’t want to lose them—“. A loud breath hitched in Kevin’s throat as he slammed his eyes shut, shaking his head.

“Hey, sweetie,” Connor whispered, leaning in close and nuzzling his nose up to Kevin’s ear. “You’re starting to shake again. Do you need a minute?”

“No, I’m okay,” Kevin shook his head as he attempted to steady his hands. “I just really want to get this over with, okay?”

The words stung once again, even though he knew Kevin didn’t mean them in the same way he’d meant them earlier in the evening.

“Of course, yeah,” Connor nodded. “Just know you can stop at any time, okay? I’m not trying to push you or anything. I’m only trying to help you. You know that, right?”

“I know that,” Kevin nodded and gave Connor’s hand a squeeze. The brunette took in a deep breath before continuing. “Anyway, every time I’d go there, to that place, it would just get worse and worse each time. At first, it was just dumb stuff like making me watch a bunch of stupid Mormon videos about why you shouldn’t act on your gay thoughts and having me sit through lectures about God and my soul and crap like that, standard bullshit.”

“Now there’s the good ‘ole blasphemous Kevin Price I used to know,” Connor grinned and gave Kevin a light squeeze. The quip even made the very-distraught brunette crack a smile. It wasn’t a big smile. No, it was a very small, sad, barely existent smile, but it was a smile nonetheless.

“But then things started to get weirder after that,” he said with a hard swallow. “One day, he sat me down and made me watch this…um, well, it was a porno, of a man and a woman… you know, doing it.” His cheeks flushed pink as he said the words, ashamed and embarrassed. “It freaked me
out, but I thought, well, maybe he’s just trying to get me feeling… I don’t know, turned on by it or something, in hopes that I’ll realize I’m not gay or something.”

“Right,” Connor nodded, “because that’s how this works.” He rolled his eyes and sighed. “Fucking Mormons.”

“But, um, but after a few minutes, he switched it to this video of a… of a gay couple doing it and it was just so…weird, Connor. I was just so confused. I remember just sitting there and being like… what is happening right now? And then he… he pulled my head back and started pouring this awful tasting syrup down my throat to try and make me puke. And I puked. I mean, I puked, everywhere. I puked everywhere. It was so...so disgusting, Connor. And he made me do this for weeks. For weeks, I came home to my dorm room three times a week, covered in puke. I stopped going to class. I stopped eating. I stopped going to the gym. Just… everything was just… so hard after that. I just didn’t want to do anything anymore, you know? My life had turned into this never ending nightmare that just kept getting worse and worse with every passing week.”

“Kevin,” Connor whispered as he blinked back tears. “Why didn’t you just tell me? You should’ve just told me. I could’ve—”

“Please,” Kevin begged, holding up a shaky hand. “Please, Connor. Just let me finish first, okay? Then you can say whatever you want to say, okay?”

Connor paused, wanting so badly to argue with him. He wanted to slap Kevin in the face for not telling him this horrendous story earlier. He wanted to yell at Kevin’s mother, slap her in the face too, even though she was a woman, because how dare she hurt Kevin like that. How dare she hurt his Kevin like that. Connor just wanted to scream, to cry, to break things. He could feel a storm of adrenaline surging throughout his body, trying desperately to get him to break his calm demeanor, make him rage out. But, instead, he just nodded sullenly, trying his best to pretend that he wasn’t overcome with the all-encompassing urge to physically punch things. For Kevin.

“Oh okay,” Connor whispered instead and just nodded for Kevin to continue.

“A few weeks later, he brought this girl in. Her name was Marjorie. She was pretty and sweet and seemed nice enough and I couldn’t for the life of me understand why someone like her would agree to be there, to take part in such a twisted fucked up game this man was playing,” Kevin shuddered a bit at the memory.

“A girl,” Connor said, scrunching his nose in confusion. “What for?”

Kevin’s cheeks flushed bright red as he turned away from Connor's gaze. “He—he made me touch her, Connor. He made me… do things to her and I couldn’t… I didn’t have the courage to stop it. I was too scared to stop it. I was too scared of not having my parents any more, of not… having a family anymore. Of being on my own. So I just went with it, even though I knew it was wrong. It all felt so, so wrong,” he closed his eyes and took in a big deep breath to try and calm down. He ran a shaky hand through his hair as he thought through his next words. “I told her she didn’t need to be there, that she was better than that, that she didn’t need to resort to being this man’s weird conversion therapy plaything. I tried to tell her that she could have a better life… that she didn’t need to prostitute herself for this disgusting man anymore. But then I found out that that disgusting man was her goddamn father. He was her father, Connor. And he… touched her. I watched him… for weeks… he would… I’d watch him touch her. It was so horrible. I couldn’t even fathom any father wanting to… do that to their own child like that, to use them like that. I mean, now that I have Charlie… I just… I can’t even imagine how horrible her life must have been. I mean, she told me. She told me all the time how horrible it was, but I still can’t even imagine. He was such a sick pervert. It makes me feel like throwing up just thinking about it.”
They were quiet for a long moment until Connor finally tapped Kevin's back, motioning for him to scoot over. Connor swung his legs over the side of the hammock and stood up. He could feel his own hands trembling now, from the shock of it all. He just needed a minute to think about Kevin’s words, about what happened to him, about these sick, twisted, monsters who dared to hurt his Kevin like that. He needed to get a grasp on all of this insanity, on everything Kevin had just told him, on everything the poor thing had been through and the fact that he never told him any of this before today. How could he not have told him any of this before today? They used to be in love. They used to be so in love and yet Kevin didn’t trust him enough to tell him any of this. It burned his skin just thinking about it.

“I think I, um,” Connor swallowed hard, not wanting to raise his voice. He was trying so hard not to raise his voice. “I just need a moment to think about this... to process all of this, okay?” He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry. It’s just... this is a lot to take in all at once.”

Kevin just nodded and looked shamefully down to his feet.

“Wait, Marjorie,” Connor blurted out, his eyes popping back open. He recognized the name from his conversations with Arnold. “Isn’t your wife’s name Marjorie?”

“Ex-wife,” Kevin whispered, barely audible. “And yeah, I was getting to that part. You didn’t let me finish.”

“Oh, I didn’t let you finish?” Connor snapped, losing whatever scrap of composure he had left inside of him. “Well, excuse me if I need a moment to process the fact that while I was off at school, frolicking around New York City, being happy and gay and finding myself, that my boyfriend of two years was secretly getting some kind of weird, fucked up conversion therapy from a goddamn child molester! I’m sorry if I need a minute to process that,” he shouted as he ran a shaking hand through his hair. “I mean, what the fuck, Kevin? You seriously never thought to tell me any of this before now? I mean, are you fucking kidding me? Is that how little you thought of our relationship? That’s how unimportant I am—was—to you? You were my whole world, Kevin. You were my whole, entire world and yet you didn’t even think to tell me that you were getting abused? I could’ve helped you. I could’ve done so many things to help you.”

Kevin lost it the moment he heard Connor raise his voice. His entire body starting shaking and retching. A shrill, horrifying sound escaped his throat. The tears were pouring out of his eyes faster than he could wipe them away. His chest was heaving. All of this was getting to be too much. It was just too much. Connor almost never raised his voice. Almost never. He never raised his voice unless he was very, very upset. But, now, Connor was yelling. And Kevin had been holding it together so well up until that point, too—so unbelievably well—but something about Connor losing his cool just made this entire conversation feel much too real, as though it were actually happening now. Connor knew his secrets. He knew everything. He knew everything. And he was angry. He was so rightfully angry. And Kevin was out of excuses.


“I’m sorry,” Kevin hiccupped, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I—I’m so sorry. I wanted to tell you. I swear, I did. But it just got to be so... big and complicated and I let it go on too long and before I knew it, it was just too—”

“Okay, just... calm down,” Connor whispered gently as he pulled Kevin close, into his warmth.
“I’m the one who should be sorry, not you. I didn’t mean to snap at you like that. Just please calm down, okay? Nobody’s angry. I’m not angry with you.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not,” Connor shook his head. “I was just in shock, that’s all. Everything’s alright now.”

“You think I’m disgusting,” Kevin choked, shaking his head violently. “You think I’m horrible and disgusting and—”

“I don’t think any of those things about you, Kevin. You were a victim. You were a victim of awful circumstances and parents and horrible, horrible people and I could never be mad at you for that,” Connor assured him. “Please, just… don’t give up now, okay? We can do this. We’re almost there. We’re strong enough to finish this. I know we are.”

Kevin wasn’t so sure about that, but he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, anyway. It was almost over. He was almost done. Maybe he could do this. Just maybe. Short of standing up to the General, back in Uganda, it would be the bravest thing he’d ever done in his life. Lord knows, he never was brave enough to stand up to his parents or his friends or anyone else in his life, for that matter, and it’s cost him everything. But he’d be brave enough to do this—just this one time. He would. He had to. For Connor. Because Connor deserved to know the whole truth. He’d do the right thing for once.

For Connor.

So he told Connor about how he’d started spending more and more time with Marjorie, as the weeks went by. It wasn’t romantic or sexual. She’d tried to make it like that, many times, but Kevin always told her that he didn’t like girls that way and that he wanted to be faithful to Connor. But they grew closer and closer, over time, as friends. Marjorie confided in Kevin about all of the sick things her father would do and how the only hope she had of getting out of it was getting married. If only she could get married, then she would be able to leave her father (and her father would willingly let her go) and have a big, Mormon family. She knew he’d stop abusing her, if she got married and built a life for herself and did everything that a good Mormon girl was supposed to do. The more time Kevin spent with her and the closer they became, the more she seemed to talk about it. But he didn’t really think anything of it since he liked talking to her. He liked talking to her because she was the only person in the entire world that he didn’t have to lie to. He didn’t have to lie to her because she was the only one who already knew all of the insane things that were happening to him. She knew everything. He didn’t have to lie.

After a pause and some reluctance, he resigned himself to telling Connor something else, something he’d been dreading telling him ever since it happened—the story of why he’d broken up with him. It was divided into a series of three strikes—one, two and three.

The first strike was not getting into NYU.

He’d never told Connor he hadn’t gotten accepted, mainly because he was embarrassed. His grades had slipped and he’d even failed some of them and NYU had very high standards. By this point, he had already been beaten down by life and Dr. Nathan and his parents and everyone else whose mission it was to “change him” and “fix him” and get him “back on track”. He was barely clinging onto this tiny thread of hope that he and Connor would make it through all of this, that he’d have the courage to stand up to everyone and move to New York. But now that he hadn’t even gotten accepted into NYU—moving to New York City was back to being nothing more than an unattainable pipe dream. So, as per usual Kevin fashion, he kept it a secret and lied.
The second strike was the night he’d cheated on Connor.

He and Marjorie were in his dorm room one night, talking—just talking—when she revealed to Kevin that she’d been able to acquire liquor—more specifically, Grey Goose vodka—from one of the senior classmen who had a crush on her. She somehow convinced the very-straight-laced Kevin Price to loosen up and have a few drinks with her. They laughed a lot and talked (more openly now, with all the alcohol in their system) and Marjorie tried a few things. She tried kissing Kevin, to which he pushed her away. She tried touching his dick, tried getting down his pants, to which he shoved her away, a bit harder than before. And then, at some point, everything started to go fuzzy. The next thing he knew, he was waking up the next morning, naked, with a wicked headache and towel full of puke next to his bed.

He rolled over to find Marjorie in his bed, equally as naked, but less hungover. He leapt out of bed in a panic and demanded to know what had happened the night before. She giggled and told him that they’d gotten drunk—too drunk—and that Kevin ended up making a pass at her. She told him that, in her drunken state, she obliged to Kevin’s persistent desire, and they’d had sex. He’d asked her if they had been safe. She said she didn’t know, but she didn’t think so.

Kevin threw up a lot that day. He still wasn’t sure what had happened or if she was lying or why she would lie but he did know one thing—whatever it was, whatever they did, he and Connor’s relationship would be irreparably damaged, forever. He was afraid to tell him, afraid what Connor would do if he’d told him. So as per usual Kevin fashion, he kept it a secret and lied.

The third strike was Marjorie announcing that she was pregnant—and that Kevin was the father.

Everything was a whirlwind after that. His parents found out. Her parents found out. They were amazed, considering Kevin was notoriously not straight. But however glad they were that Kevin had showed some—interest—in the opposite sex, they still got scolded and were told they’d have to marry. Marjorie was eager and excited to get married and Kevin knew why. He knew how much that would mean to her—how much it would mean for her to finally be free from her tyrannical father. But Kevin… Kevin had a whole host of reasons to not get married. And one of them was Connor.

After finishing the story, Kevin let out a very tired, worn out sigh and sat up a little. He wanted to properly look into Connor’s eyes, so he could make it right, so he could try and fix this. Surely, he thought, Connor would be furious. He had to be. And he’d certainly have a slew of questions that needed answering.

But when he looked back up and met Connor’s beautiful blue eyes—and they did look so, so beautiful, with the glow of moonlight shining through them—Kevin was more than a little surprised to find them without an ounce of anger. They weren’t angry at all. They were glassy and sad, completely filled to the brim with unshed tears. Pretty soon, droplets of tears began leaking out of Connor's eyes. Without thinking about it, Kevin reached up and wiped them away with his thumb. It was like instinct, as though someone had invaded his body and moved his hand for him.

“Kevin,” Connor murmured softly as he blinked back tears with a sniffle. Kevin watched them roll over his own fingers and drip down his wrist.

“No, no…please don’t cry, Connor,” Kevin whispered and shook his head, despite knowing full well that his own face was also covered in tears. “I hate it when you cry. I’ve always hated it. Especially when it’s my own fault. Please, just don’t cry, okay?”

“Not your fault,” Connor shook his head with a tearful smile as he reached up to Kevin's eyes to do the same for him. He felt funny little tingles down in his belly as Connor’s slender fingers grazed his
“Why are you being so nice to me?” Kevin asked sadly, his hand still resting gently against Connor’s cheek. He could feel the other man’s lips quivering. “I’ve been nothing but awful to you, Connor. I don’t deserve...” he lifted his hand off the redhead’s cheek in order to gesture to his whole person. “I don’t deserve your tears or your friendship or your sympathy or any of it. I don’t deserve any of it. I don’t deserve... anything. I don’t deserve you.”

“Yes, you do,” Connor sniffled and reached up to take ahold of one of Kevin’s trembling hand’s, lacing their fingers together. They silently gazed into each other’s eyes for a long time after that. A soft wind blew, brushing their hair into their eyes. The hammock swayed a bit, to and fro. They could hear ducks quacking and crickets chirping in the distance.

Connor broke the silence first. “Can I just ask you one thing, Kevin?”

“Of course. Anything, anything at all,” Kevin whispered. “What is it?”

“At what point during all of this did you stop…” he paused for a moment. "Loving me?”

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“It’s just…I’ve been asking myself the same question, over and over, for years now… what I’d done to make you stop loving me and I could never pinpoint it,” Connor looked down with a sniffle. “I just don’t know what I did wrong.”

He felt Kevin reach out and curl a finger underneath his chin, trying to pull it up so their eyes could meet. As Connor obeyed and lifted up his chin, he could see how unsure and hesitant the other man looked. After a moment, Kevin straightened himself out a little and reached into his pants pocket. Strangely, he pulled out his wallet and stared at it for a few moments, as though possibly reconsidering whatever he was about to do. Finally, he opened it up and slowly pulled out what looked like a ring. Connor recognized it almost instantly. It was the ring he’d given Kevin years before—the promise ring—the one that matched the blue one Connor still had, tucked away in a box at home for safe keeping. He’d never had the heart to pawn it or give it to anyone else. As he sat there, staring at the ring in Kevin’s hand, he just couldn’t believe his eyes. The beautiful purple and silver promise ring he’d given to Kevin, eight years before, when they were only twenty years old, was here, in Kevin’s wallet.

The other man held it up and showed it to Connor. “I carry it around with me everywhere, you know,” Kevin whispered with a tearful smile. “It lives in my wallet. I never take it out.”

“But, I don’t—“, Connor just gaped at the ring in Kevin’s hand for a moment, absolutely stunned. “I don’t—I don’t understand. Why would you carry that around with you?”

Kevin swallowed hard and gave Connor a knowing look. “Why do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Connor stuttered, shaking his head. “Because you’re insane? Because you’ve finally gone insane.”

“Because I never stopped,” Kevin said, tears rolling down cheeks. “I’ve never stopped... loving you, Connor,” he admitted with a sad laugh. He allowed his hand that held onto the ring to flop unceremoniously down against his leg. “So, there you have it. You can gloat all you want now. You can say ‘I told you so’ or “ha ha I knew it” or whatever else you’ve been planning to say if I ever admitted it. Go on, I know you want to.”

“No, no, no,” Connor shook his head, blubbering now, tears streaming down his cheeks. “No, that
can’t be true, Kevin. Because if you loved me, you wouldn’t have hurt me like that. You wouldn’t have left me. You would’ve told me about your problems and about what happened and I would’ve helped you and you would have never left me.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Kevin said in such a soft whisper, it hurt Connor’s heart to hear it. “I was really messed up, Connor. Everything in my life was… so, so messed up. I’m still so… messed up.”

“But, I could’ve helped you,” Connor stuttered, his voice wavering. He was fighting back tears, but it was honestly no use anymore. “You could’ve come to New York and stayed with me and I could’ve helped you. You could’ve gotten away from that school and that doctor and your parents. We could’ve made it through everything together. But instead you just dumped me and decided somewhere along the line that I was evil and you wanted nothing to do with me. Where—where in that scenario am I supposed to believe that you still loved me? Because that doesn’t sound like love to me.”

“My life was falling apart, Connor,” Kevin sniffled. “I just couldn’t—I couldn’t handle it anymore… I just wanted it to stop. It was getting so hard to even get out of bed in the morning, to function, to exist. And I snapped. Because I just couldn't take it anymore. It was too hard. Being gay, being different, everyone constantly trying to change me and fix me… it was just too hard. At least from where I was sitting. Maybe not for you, maybe not in New York where it’s okay to be gay. Maybe not when you have an understanding mother like yours. But from where I was sitting, in my life… with my parents… and that school. It was not okay, Connor.”

“You could’ve come to New York,” Connor repeated, knowing he was on the verge of falling apart. “We could’ve worked it out. Nothing’s impossible. Not when you set your mind to it.”

“And lose my parents and my little brother and my little sister forever?” Kevin gasped. “To go through the rest of my life always being afraid of what people might think of us? What they might think of me? It just seemed so much easier to lie. That became my new life slogan—'it's easier to lie'.”

“Listen, nobody said this would be easy, Kevin,” Connor shook his head. “Being gay, being like us, no matter what city you’re in or who your parents are, isn’t easy. There’s always someone giving you a funny look, or someone who doesn’t like you because of who you are. There’s always something that gets in our way. But you know what, Kevin? Having love, having what we had, makes all of that worth it,” he said firmly. “And the fact that it wasn’t worth it to you can only mean one thing—that you didn’t really love me.”

“I did love you. I do… love you,” Kevin sniffled, looking as though he was trying his best not to cry. ”But when Marjorie told me she was pregnant, I just…that was just the last straw, you know?”

“But it didn’t have to be. We could’ve—“

“The universe had been trying everything in its power to break us up, to beat me down until I couldn't take it anymore, until I cracked. Well, it finally won, that day—the day she told me.”

“So it was that easy for you to just up and leave me then?” Connor asked, trying his best not to shout. “It was so easy for you to just walk away from everything we had, from everything we could’ve had together?”

“No, it wasn’t easy, Connor,” Kevin shook his head. “It was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my entire life. I cried for weeks. But I couldn’t leave Marjorie—alone and pregnant with my child with her monster of a father. Because that was my child inside of her, Connor. My child. I didn’t want to
believe it at first, I refused to believe it. So I made her get a paternity test, to be sure. But the baby was mine. And from that moment on, my happiness didn’t matter anymore. Everything I did from that moment on was for Charlie.”

“I understand all that, Kevin. Don’t you think I know that? But you still should’ve told me,” Connor closed his eyes and tried to calmly state. “You still should’ve told me everything because maybe we could’ve worked it out, in time. You’ve been divorced for over four years now, Kevin. We could’ve spent the past four years together, being happy, raising your daughter… together. If we had, then maybe both of us wouldn’t be sitting here right now, crying, and being fucking miserable.”

“Oh, really? And how would that have gone?” Kevin laughed, shaking his head. “Oh, hey, by the way, Connor, I’m really sorry but I’ve actually been going through living Hell for the past few months and I’m practically on the verge of suicide and now, get this, I’ve accidentally knocked a girl up—yeah, we had sex, I cheated on you—and now she’s pregnant with my child but, yeah, I totally still want to see if we can work this out! Do you honestly think you would’ve stayed with me after that?”

“Kevin, listen to me. That isn’t what hap—”

“No,” Kevin shook his head. “You were… so happy in New York, doing your own thing and I just… I didn’t want to mess that up.”

“I would’ve happily taken everything being messed up than losing you, Kevin.”

“They won. The Church won. My parents won. Everybody won, Connor. Everybody won, but us. My parents wouldn’t have been okay with it. You wouldn’t have been okay with it. I know you wouldn’t have been. You were only twenty-one years old, for Christ's sakes. You had your whole life ahead of you—a wonderful, fun-filled life in New York City. You weren’t ready to have a kid, Connor, and I didn’t have the courage to be myself. It just… it wouldn’t have worked out. There’s no way in Hell that ever would’ve worked out. You wouldn’t have said yes to that life.”

“You never even gave me the chance to say no,” Connor slammed his eyes shut, but tears were leaking out regardless. “You just made that choice for me.”

“It’s the same choice, either way,” Kevin said. “Does it really matter which one of us made it?”

“Yeah, it does actually,” Connor said, fresh tears falling from his eyes as he opened them. “Because I would’ve made a different choice.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I know you didn’t cheat on me, Kevin Price. Because you are not a cheater,” Connor said, blinking back tears. “She got you drunk. She got you black-out drunk. And she used you. I know she did. She gave you something. She put something in your drink, Kevin. Probably from her sicko dad’s drug supply that he kept on hand to use on kids like you. You know she did,” he shook his finger in Kevin’s face. “You said it yourself how desperate she was to get out of her dad’s house, to get married, to have a kid, so he’d stop abusing her. It all makes sense now. All of it. It all makes perfect sense now.”

“Just because I don’t remember that night very clearly,” Kevin said, swallowing hard. “Doesn’t mean she drugged me. I got drunk and blacked out or something and I just don’t remember. That still isn’t an excuse for cheating on you, Connor. There’s no excuse for that. Especially not after all the… problems we’d been having. And I don’t believe for a second that you would’ve been okay with me getting a girl pregnant, Connor. Not for a second.”
“Kevin,” Connor whispered and pulled the other man down into him, knocking their foreheads together. “Kevin Price. Do you have any idea how stupid you are sometimes?”

Kevin shook his head, his big, sad, brown eyes looking adorably childlike.

“Because I would’ve said yes, you idiot,” Connor punched him in the chest as an involuntary sob escaped his throat. “I would’ve been there for you and for Charlie, no matter what happened, no matter what insanity happened. But you didn’t even give me a chance to prove that. You didn’t even give me a chance.”

“But why would anyone ever want to stay with someone who would do—“

“Because I know you, Kevin,” Connor sobbed as he rubbed his forehead into Kevin’s. He was clasp[ing Kevin’s hands so tight, he was pretty sure he was hurting him by now. “You forget how well I know you. You’re not a cheater, Kevin Price. You never have been. You never will be. You’re Kevin. You’re my sweet, kind, amazing Kevin who would never hurt me or anyone else, not if it were up to him.” He felt Kevin’s arms suddenly wrap around him and pull him closer. “I would’ve listened to you. I would’ve helped you and Marjorie and Charlie. I would’ve understood. I could’ve helped you raise your daughter. I could’ve helped you and her and everyone else, but you didn’t let me.”

“But why would you—“

“Because she’s your daughter, Kevin,” Connor cried out. “And I love you. God, you are such a dummy sometimes. I fucking love you, you idiot!” He sobbed into Kevin’s chest, knowing he was losing complete control over his emotions now, knowing that crying and sniffing and wailing was making him look weak and pathetic and out of control. But in that moment, he no longer cared. He just wanted Kevin to hold him and console him and tell him everything was going to be okay even though nothing was okay.

“You say that now,” Kevin whispered into Connor’s hair as he held him. “But I don’t think you would’ve said that back then. You had an amazing life in New York. You were finally happy for once and doing everything you’ve always wanted to do. You had friends and you went to parties and gay clubs and you were about to start your career. My life was completely ruined. I didn’t want to ruin yours too.”

“I don’t think you have any idea how much I love you and how much it hurt me when you…” Connor lost the rest of the sentence to a sob. “To this day, I have never felt pain like that. When I tell you I would’ve been there for you, Kevin… that we would’ve made it through all that, I mean it. I would’ve been there for you and for Charlie and we would’ve been okay. We would have been happy. I know we would have. But you didn’t even give me that chance. You didn’t give us a chance. You just ran away from your problems, like you always do. Like you always do. Because it was easier. And now look at where it’s gotten us. Nowhere.”

They were quiet for a long time after that. Connor had nothing left to say. He’d said it all. And Kevin didn’t seem to have any good retort against Connor’s emotional plea. They sat there, on their knees, kneeling towards one another on the hammock, shaking and rubbing and caressing and sobbing. They didn’t know why exactly, but their arms were still wrapped around each other’s waists, holding each other close, trying to console each other, despite being the reason the other was wrecked. Connor closed his eyes and buried his face into Kevin’s neck. He could feel Kevin’s strong hands resting against the small of his back, gently moving up and down. He pulled Kevin closer every time he felt a tiny tingle shoot through him, despite the fact that he was feeling so angry at Kevin that he honestly thought he might burst.
“What do we do now?” Kevin quietly broke the silence after a very, very long time.

“We go inside,” Connor whispered with a sniffle and shakily disentangled his arms from Kevin’s body as he moved to step off the hammock. “I need water and painkillers,” he said. “And alcohol. Lots and lots of alcohol.” He reached out to Kevin and gestured for him to take his hand. “Come with me,” he said softly and helped a very worn-out looking Kevin off the hammock. “We’re not done yet.”

They made it back home and plunked down into the kitchen chairs, exhausted and worn out and frazzled.

“I need alcohol,” Connor said again, but made no move to get up. He allowed his head to flop down into his arms. He moaned a little and shook his head.

“I’ll get us both some,” Kevin stammered as he stood up. He had no idea what was supposed to happen now. He’d never thought this day would come, a day where Connor knew. He didn’t know what their relationship, what their dynamic, should be now. “What do you want?”

“Alcohol,” Connor mumbled into his arm.

“More specifically?”

“Cold alcohol, over ice,” Connor said. After a moment, he looked up at Kevin with the tiniest smirk.

“You’re incorrigible,” was all Kevin said with an equally amused smirk. He turned back around to grab two glasses out of the cabinet and filled them with ice. There were various vodkas to choose from and Kevin honestly didn’t know squat about alcohol so he just picked the one that said mango on the front. “You’re getting mango vodka.”

“I want coconut,” Connor murmured as he closed his eyes, resting his head into the crook of his elbow. “Mango coconut. I’m on vacation.”

“You should’ve asked for that in the first place,” Kevin chided and poured Connor the mango-coconut mixture over ice.

“You’ll do it anyway,” Connor said sleepily. And he was right. Kevin would.

As he placed the two glasses down on the table, he took a moment to just stare at Connor. His head was laying on his elbows, eyes closed with a stray piece of reddish hair flopped over them. His eyes were swollen and red from crying. His freckled cheeks were streaked from tears and puffed out. He looked completely gutted, as though having that conversation with Kevin had just depleted every last ounce of energy he had inside of him.

“I’m sorry,” Kevin apologized quietly, without meaning to. And he didn’t want to—he really didn’t—but his hand was already moving to brush the piece of hair out of Connor’s eyes. “I’m sorry I wasn’t strong enough to be with you. I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry for everything.”

Connor opened his eyes slowly, instantly locking with Kevin’s. The brunette was gazing down at him, longingly, with what he knew had to be a broken look on his face.
“Your eyes are so beautiful,” Kevin said, because he could now and it was the truth. *Fuck it*, nothing was stopping him now. Well, *everything* was stopping him. But not right *now*, not in *this* moment. In *this* moment, he was free. “Everything about you is just… so, so beautiful.”

“Kevin,” Connor whispered hoarsely and reached up to pull on Kevin’s hands, urging him to sit down next to him. “Kevin. We have to talk.”

“Isn’t that what we’ve been doing?” Kevin laughed, sadly. Connor laughed, sadly, too. They sat quietly for a moment. “So… are you *sure* this still isn’t a date? I mean… after all that.” Kevin tried to joke, in an attempt to lighten the mood just a little.

Connor hesitated for a moment before answering. He spent some time simply searching Kevin’s eyes for something. What that was, Kevin had no idea. “Do you want it to be?”

Now it was Kevin’s turn to pause. He didn’t know the answer to that question anymore. If anyone had asked him just two hours ago, the answer would have been absolutely, unequivocally, *no*. But now… now that Connor knew. Now that everything was out in the open and Connor still hadn’t punched him in the face. Maybe, now, they could. But then Kevin started thinking about his mother. And how she would react. And Charlie. Charlie would be the weird kid in school who had two dads. She might get picked on. She would get picked on. No doubt about that. And she wouldn’t be allowed back at the Mormon school. They’d probably have to leave Utah. And everything was just too much. He needed time to think about this.

“No.”

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The light in Connor’s eyes went out instantly the moment Kevin uttered the word “no”. Not wanting to argue, he just nodded at Kevin and reached out to grab hold of his mango-coconut vodka. He took in a long, slow sip, reveling in the feeling of the scorching liquid burning his throat, all the way down.

Kevin shook his head. He reached over and took hold of Connor’s glass and moved it down. “That isn’t what I meant,” Kevin tried to explain. “I meant no right *now*. But maybe… maybe if I get some help. Maybe if I, um, see someone and get… get better. Then we could…” he trailed off and looked down to face his own glass of vodka. He lifted it up and took in a sip. He looked as though he might vomit at the burn it caused, but he sucked it down anyway.

“I have an idea,” Connor said softly and took Kevin’s hands into his own. “Do you trust me?”

Kevin nodded. “Of course I trust you.”

“Good,” Connor smiled a very sleepy smile. “Now, listen to me, okay? We’re going to have one last amazing day at Disney World tomorrow. We’re going to find Moana so Charlie can get her picture,” he beamed, making Kevin chuckle a little. A sad, tearful chuckle, but still a chuckle. “We’re going to call my mother and make something up about how you and I are back together. It’s literally her last dying wish to see me back together with you.” Kevin laughed at that—*really* laughed. Connor laughed too. “I swear, she likes you more than she likes me. She won’t be around in a few months, Kevin. She only has about six months left, max. I’d just like her to die knowing that I was happy.”

“Even if you weren’t?”

“I’m getting to that part,” Connor said and slapped his hand, playfully. “You didn’t let me finish.”

“Sorry.”
“We’re going to go back home, to Utah. I’m going to take care of my mother for as long as she has,” he went on. “You’re going to go to a therapist.” He then felt Kevin’s hands tense up a bit at the word. “A real therapist. Not some wack-a-doo Mormon conversion therapist, Kevin. You’re going to go to a real therapist and get real help for your problems. You’re going to be honest with them and tell them everything you told me, but more. Much more.” He paused a moment before sighing. “And you’re going to talk to your mother, too.”

“My mother?”

“Yes, your mother,” Connor said, calmly. “You’re going to politely ask her to stop poisoning Charlie’s mind with her homophobic ideologies and you’re going to let her know that if she doesn’t stop, then you’ll have to find someone else to watch Charlie.” Kevin looked frightened about that one, but nodded his head nonetheless. “You’re going to have an honest talk with her, Kevin. A real talk. About you. About your sexuality. And she’s going to listen. You have bargaining power, with Charlie. She has to listen to your story and she has to come to terms with who you are.”

“I don’t think I can—“

“That’s what the therapist is for,” Connor soothed, giving Kevin’s hand a squeeze. “They’ll help you feel less afraid to be who you really are, Kevin. They’ll give you moral support and a new perspective on things. Having some… validation from someone other than yourself can help a lot. I know it sounds stupid, but it really can help. I know first hand. I’ve been going to one for the past six years.”

“Because of me?” Kevin gasped, choking a little on his words a bit. “You go to a therapist because of… me?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Connor narrowed his eyes with a playful smile. He gave Kevin a little kick under the table. “We talk about a lot of things in therapy—including you—and it helps. It really does. And when you’re ready… when you’re really ready, after you’ve worked out some stuff with your therapist and you’re starting to feel better about who you are, then you’re going to come and find me and let me know. You’re going to come find me, Kevin. I’ll be in Utah for a while, taking care of my mom and the house and everything. I’ll be there, for whenever you’re ready.”

“I could help you,” Kevin offered quickly. “With your mom, with the house—“

“No.” Connor shook his head. “You, Kevin. Focus on you. Focus on healing yourself and coming to terms with who you are. Take some time for yourself. Don’t worry about me. I’ve waited six years for you, Kevin. Seven if you count the year you were at school. I can wait a little longer. Trust me on this, okay? We’re going to be okay, you and me. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Kevin sat there for a while, gazing into Connor’s eyes, looking amazed. “I don’t understand. Why would you wait for me? Why would anyone wait for me like that? Especially after… after everything I did to you. After what I did—“

“Because,” Connor started through a tearful smile, “I happen to know that Kevin Price—the real Kevin Price—is more than worth the wait.”

The next morning, Kevin woke up with a headache, feeling groggy and stiff. He glanced at the clock and saw it was just past nine in the morning. His eyes landed on the bed on the other side of the
room, Connor's bed. It was empty. He knew he and Connor hadn’t done… anything like *that* last night. He supposed it was possible the redhead had gotten up before him, but Connor almost never got up before him. Turning over onto his back, his elbow came into contact with a face.

“Ow!” Connor yelped and rubbed his nose. “What was that for?”

“Why are you in my bed?” Kevin asked, all flustered and surprised.

Connor rolled his eyes. “Jesus, I thought we’d gotten past all this nonsense. Isn’t that what last night was for?”

Kevin looked confused. “Oh, no, I—I didn’t mean it like *that*. I know… I know we’re past all that. I just—why are you in the bed with me?”

“Relax, Kevin.” Connor smiled and ran a tender hand down Kevin’s arm. “We didn’t do anything last night.”

“Oh, thank god,” Kevin sighed and flopped back onto his pillow. “I didn’t think I drank *that* much mango stuff.”

“You barely drank any. I drank yours, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“After we went to bed last night, I just couldn’t fall asleep. I laid awake for hours,” Connor admitted. “I just… wanted to be close to you, that’s all. Just to help me fall asleep.”

Kevin nodded. He was suddenly overcome with the urge to kiss Connor on the lips, especially with his face looking all sleepy like that and his eyes looking lidded and woozy. But, he wouldn’t. Not yet. Not until he did what Connor asked him to do and get some help. Connor said he could trust him. Kevin hadn’t trusted him, years ago, and it ended in disaster after disaster. He was at rock bottom now, with all his secrets laid open and bare, and there was nowhere to go but up. And Connor was right—it might be nice to go up with someone he loved, for a change. With a partner. It would be scary for Kevin, given everything that happened, and he might need to take it very, very slow. But at least he was trying now. At least he was willing to try.

When Kevin and Connor walked out into the kitchen, several of the former Elders whistled suggestively at the pair. Arnold looked way too excited for his own good and Naba was jumping up and down a little, practically squealing.

“Alright, knock it off,” Kevin reprimanded the bunch as he tried to straighten out his hair. “Nothing happened between us last night so get those looks off your faces.”

“It doesn’t look like *nothing* happened,” Arnold beamed as he tugged on Kevin’s wrinkled and disheveled button down shirt. “It looks like I’m fifty bucks in the plus.”

Connor and Kevin glanced at each other, horrified that their friends would actually *bet* on them. “You took *bets*?” They cried out in unison, instantly shaming everyone in the room.

With guilty faces and silently passed money, they went back to going about their business. Pretty soon, Charlie came running out to them from Arnold and Naba’s bedroom, jumping up and down and hugging her daddy’s legs.

“Hi, sweetie,” Kevin said softly and knelt down to her level. “Did you have fun last night?”
“I got a ring pop, see?” She showed him, a big smile on her face. “Do you see it?”

“I see it, I see it,” Kevin nodded with a sad smile as he wrapped his hands around her waist. He felt the sting of tears behind his eyes and he wasn’t quite sure why. Maybe it was how sweet Charlie was, how wonderful it was to have her in his life. Maybe it was her laughter or her silly dances or the way she looked up at him, in that way she did, in that way that told Kevin exactly how much she loved him.

“Uncle Connor, look!” She ran over to him to show him the ring pop. “It’s cherry!”

“Mmm,” Connor feigned enthusiasm and pretended to lick it. “Cherry’s my favorite.”

“No, it’s mine!” She giggled and Connor leaned in to tickle her tummy, making her shriek and bubble over with laughter.

And in that moment, a tiny little beacon of hope began to grow in Kevin’s heart. It hadn’t been there last night or last week or the weeks before or even years ago. Not even when he had Charlie, as awful as that sounds. But in that moment, as he watched the two people he loved most in the entire world, smiling and laughing—well, it was enough to light up the little beacon of hope in Kevin’s heart, the one that had remained dark and untouched for far too many years. And that, Kevin thought—well, that just felt really, really good.
Chapter Summary

It's the gang's last day at Disney!

Chapter Notes

Legend:

*** = Asterisks are memory scenes
___= Regular lines are present day scenes

Purple Dividers = Kevin POV
Blue Dividers = Connor POV
~ = POV switch within a scene

Feedback makes my day, so if you liked it, let me know! :)

Chapter 9: Last Day

The group’s last day at Disney World was finally upon them and Kevin was feeling bittersweet, to say the least.

Despite being his favorite place in the whole world, there was a small part of him that kind of wanted to get back home, if for no other reason than to be able to fall asleep in his own bed again. They’d been here for ten days now and his feet had been aching to high Heaven for at least the last five; along with his heart, which felt as though it had been stomped on, chewed up, and spit back out without an ounce of empathy or compassion. And yet, by some miracle or magic (or, perhaps, Connor McKinley), it somehow managed to get all bandaged up and, ever so carefully, put back together again. He couldn’t even understand how it was possible, given everything that had happened, and yet, here they were.

It still hurt, of course. Everything hurt. And it was hot—so hot—and he was tired—so tired—and he really just needed some time alone to think about everything. He’d have to sit down and process all that had happened and all that was yet to come. And he would do it exactly how Connor had asked him to because he did, in fact, trust Connor McKinley implicitly, with his life. Maybe he hadn’t trusted him back then, when everything had gone to shit. Maybe he hadn’t trusted him a mere two days ago or even just one day ago, really, but he sure did trust him now.
And there was just so much to do now, it seemed. He’d have to find a counselor—a real one—to help him work through his feelings and figure everything out. He’d have to confront his parents, as much as he was dreading it. He’d have to take time to heal a little before jumping back into anything with Connor. He had to. He knew that now. Because Connor was right. Connor was always right about these kinds of things, as were Arnold and Nabulungi and even his second college roommate, Benny, who had advised him not to get married all those years ago. They had been right, all of them. Why he couldn’t have simply seen that truth six years ago was beyond him. The mind, it seemed, was a very strange and fickle thing and Kevin’s, in particular, needed a lot of help in healing. In trying to protect itself from bad feelings, it inadvertently caused him an insurmountable amount of pain—an amount that, until recently, seemed impossible to overcome.

Even with Connor by his side, the whole thing felt unbelievably daunting and overwhelming. The prospect of changing anything in his life, even something one might deem tiny and insignificant, frightened him—terrified him, really. Because the last time he’d tried to change anything, to be true to himself, he’d just gotten burned—scorched, fried, beaten, ripped of his dignity. And that scarred him quite a bit, probably more than he realized. But, at least now he was resigned to trying. He would try this time. If he was going to have any chance at finding happiness—real happiness—then he knew he’d have to face his fears head on and never look back, no matter how scary or impossible they seemed. And he would do it this time, once and for all. Not for Connor, not for Arnold, not even for Charlie, not for anybody, but himself. He wouldn’t back down. He wouldn’t be clubbed into submission. He wouldn’t be coerced. Because he finally had a chance—a chance to be happy again, a chance to be happy again with Connor—and that was one chance he wouldn’t let slip past him again.

But first, he had one last day at Disney to take care of—and he was determined to make it a great one.

There was an innocent, childlike, part of Kevin Price—a very old part of him dating back to the first time he’d seen Mickey Mouse in the flesh—that wanted nothing more than to stay right there in Disney World forever. The pure joy on his daughter’s face was reason enough. That beautiful, gigantic smile that would blossom on Charlie’s face every time they’d see one of her favorite characters walking around (they still have yet to spot Moana) or whenever they’d go to breakfast and eat syrup-doused waffles shaped like Mickey, where she’d always smile up at him, her eyes all twinkling stars over forest green, thanking him, in a way; or whenever he would hear her delighted little squeals of joy during a particularly fun ride. Well, nothing in the entire world could ever beat that—not all the gold nor all the the money nor all the power. No, the sweet sound of his baby girl’s laughter meant everything to Kevin. It just meant… everything.

He was already mentally planning their next trip to Disney World, anyway. They’d go at least every couple of years, that was for sure. There were still a ton of rides Charlie couldn’t go on yet because of her tiny size and she was still too young to really understand some of the stories and, despite praying that it wouldn’t happen—God, how he hoped it wouldn’t happen—there was a good chance she wouldn’t even end up remembering most of this trip by the time she was older. The knowledge broke Kevin’s heart a little—okay, who was he kidding, it broke his heart a lot—but he figured they’d just have to plan more Disney trips then, wouldn’t they?

After getting a bit of a sluggish start that morning, they were finally all sitting together at breakfast, munching hungrily on their final Mickey waffles of the trip. He felt totally exhausted for obvious reasons, but thank goodness for the giant cup of black iced coffee in front of him. He was sitting across from a totally spent and worn-out looking Connor McKinley. The redhead’s eyes were abnormally puffy and droopy, with dark bags underneath. The distressing events of the night before had taken its toll on both of them, that much was obvious. And even now, that the ordeal was finally behind them, the truth laid open, naked and bare, Kevin still had trouble wrapping his head around
exactly what had happened. The whole night just felt like one long, continuous blur - a blur of emotions and feelings and exhaustion and revelations and tears. So many tears. A pang of guilt hit Kevin as he gazed across the table at Connor with his worn, droopy eyes and repeated yawns. And, yet, there was a much bigger part of himself—a part he’d worked so hard to push down and bury all these years—that was finally beginning to understand just how important and necessary it all was. Painful, yes, but necessary.

What amazed Kevin the most about the whole thing was the fact that Connor had somehow known all of this already, had known something, for the longest time, that Kevin had never even considered before. But Kevin was smart, very smart—he knew that—which was why he could never understand how Connor always seemed to know these things before he did. It was just one of those things that Kevin was starting to remember how much he loved about Connor McKinley—the way he seemed to just know things, things that Kevin didn’t; things like how to always win at Scrabble and how to unearth repressed emotions from his ex-boyfriend that he hadn’t even seen in two years. How Connor McKinley always managed to do that—and do it so effortlessly—was something Kevin couldn’t even begin to understand.

Kevin kept his gaze on Connor as he watched him tiredly cut into his waffles. Connor was very sensible with his syrup usage and always cut up his waffles into little bite-sized pieces, whereas Kevin tended to overdo on the syrup a little and would typically forgo cutting them up, preferring to simply dig right into them. He felt his lip twitch upwards as he watched the other man transform his Mickey waffle into tiny, perfectly symmetrical bites. Connor must have felt Kevin's gaze on him because he looked up to meet his eyes. They shared a secret smile, one that was unusually soft and filled with silent reassurances and understanding and a bunch of other emotions too that Kevin couldn’t quite pinpoint. The redhead reached across the table and took Kevin’s hand into his own, giving it a gentle squeeze. He felt his shoulders instantly relax at the touch. It would be okay, Kevin thought. This would be okay. With a tired smile, Connor McKinley went back to cutting up his waffles and Kevin turned his attention to Charlie, who was now quietly laughing at something silly Harrison had just said.

As Charlie brought her fork up to her mouth to take in the day’s first bite of Mickey waffle—one of his ears—, Kevin saw an opportunity to make her laugh. So, he did his very best Mickey Mouse impersonation as the bite neared her lip— “Ohhh nooo, little girl, please don’t eat my ear, noooo! A mouse just isn’t a mouse without his ears!”

Charlie erupted into giggles at that and it was quite difficult for Kevin to keep himself in-character long enough for Mickey’s ear to finally get all gobbled up. His antics made Charlie laugh so much, a big glob of syrup didn’t quite make it into her mouth. He could hear Connor and Arnold laughing now too, along with Naba and Harry and the rest of the group. He felt a flood of warmth pass through him at the sound. It was quick, but strong.

He knew he and Connor would need to talk more about everything that happened. They’d have to. That, like all of the other daunting tasks that laid in front of him, was inevitable. But, first, he’d do what Connor McKinley told him they would do—have one last amazing day at Disney World.

And that sounded a-okay to him.

The moment they entered the gates of Magic Kingdom, Kevin was already peering down at the map, studiously formulating a plan of attack for the day’s activities. Kevin always insisted on leading the
group around the park, so whenever they got the map after entering, everyone usually just stood
around and waited for Kevin to announce their plan for the day. Then they’d all follow Kevin’s fast-
paced walk toward whatever attraction he had in mind. Arnold and Neeley gently teased him by
calling him a “Park Nazi”, but Connor honestly thought it was adorable; the way he’d excitedly take
charge of the map and direct the group to whatever attraction he had on their itinerary for the day.
He’d let Kevin lead him wherever he wanted to go, really—especially if he was wearing his Mickey
ears. Connor was such a sucker for Mickey ears.

Today though, the redhead stood back a little from the group as they all crowded around Kevin. He
accidentally let out another exhausted yawn. Ugh—he already wasn’t sure how much longer he was
going to last and the day had barely even begun. His brain felt like a bowl of mush; his body,
completely and utterly drained. The two large coffees he’d already ingested that morning didn’t seem
to be doing zilch for his stamina. Letting out another sleepy yawn, he glanced around him at the little
shops that lined Main Street USA, trying desperately to glimpse a Starbucks or a Dunkin Donuts or
any place in which one could get a fix of caffeine. He needed a third cup of coffee if he was going to
have any chance at making it through the day without passing out.

He’d lied to Kevin earlier that morning when he told him he’d gotten a few hours of sleep the night
before. He hadn’t gotten any sleep, not even one measly wink. He just couldn’t stop thinking about
Kevin—about his story, about all of the awful things that had happened to him. And the worst part of
it all—for Connor, at least—was that it had all happened right in front of him, right under his nose. It
broke his heart, all of it. After Kevin had fallen asleep the night before, he just laid there—awake,
reeling, crying, sniffing, holding Kevin close to him, as close as he possibly could, in his arms,
trying his damnedest to make sense of it all. Even now, none of it made any sense. There was a good
chance it would never make sense, he thought sadly, because how could it?

It was all worth it though, of course, for Kevin—for his Kevin, whose side he’d curled up against the
night before for the first time in so many years, close and safe and warm, with arms wrapped around
each other’s waists and drool on pillows and the feeling of each other’s heartbeat against their chests.

Despite looking run-down and exhausted, the brunette did seem a bit lighter now, Connor observed,
as though the entire weight of the world wasn’t resting on his shoulders anymore. Relief, he thought.
That was what he saw in Kevin’s eyes now—relief. And relief sure did look good on him.

“Okay, so here’s the plan for today, you guys,” Kevin announced to the group of former Elders as
they all gathered around him. He pointed to the map. “Let’s hit all the Magic Kingdom parks first.
First, we’ll go to Adventureland and hit the Pirates of the Caribbean ride. Then we’ll walk through
Frontierland and do Big Thunder Mountain again—we all liked that one. Then we’ll go to
Fantasyland and hit a couple smaller rides there. Oh, and we’ll visit the Castle again—duh. Then
we’ll finish up at Tomorrowland and do Space Mountain one last time. Maybe we can even run back
on if the line isn’t too long—,” he stopped and glanced down at Charlie, who was now yanking
impatiently on the hem of his shirt, trying to get his attention.

“Daddy!”

“Yeah, hun?”

“What about the one with the song?” She asked Kevin sweetly, tugging again on his shirt.
“Remember, remember?”

“Don’t worry,” Kevin said, giving her bouncy curls a ruffle. “We’re gonna do It’s a Small World
again. That’s in Fantasyland.”

“Yay!” She jumped up and down. “That’s my favoritest one!”
“I know it is, sweetie,” Kevin smirked. “We went on five times the other day. I can still hear the song in my sleep.”

Connor found his lips curling up as he watched them. Charlie had indeed made them go on It’s a Small World no less than five times the other day. Luckily, it was towards the end of the day so they were able to run right back on without any trouble. The problem was afterwards—Connor just couldn’t get that incessant song out of his head. He found himself humming it at dinner, in the shower, on the toilet… everywhere. It drove him positively bonkers. But, anything for Kevin’s sweet baby girl.

He listened to Kevin go on and on about the day’s itinerary, pointing out all the stops he wanted them to hit on the map. They’d be topping off the night back in Epcot in the Mexico section for one last fancy dinner at La Hacienda de San Angel (Kevin had made the reservations over a month ago, of course) and to watch one final fireworks display over the lake. They’d gotten into a heated debate that morning as they walked to the bus about which fireworks display was superior. Kevin had voted for the Castle but the majority won out with Epcot. Kevin eventually had to admit that the fireworks over the lake at Epcot were also quite spectacular, so he didn’t argue too much.

“Alright.” Kevin nodded in finality as he closed up the map with a grin, shoving it into his pocket. “Everyone okay with the plan?”

The former-Elders all nodded, shouting an assortment of woo-hoos and yesses at Kevin. It seemed as though everyone was full of smiles and in good spirits that morning.

“As long as we hit Space Mountain again, I’m totally good, dude,” Arnold said with a clap to Kevin’s back as they started for Adventureland.

“You know it, buddy,” Kevin said, returning the gesture.

“I don’t care what we do as long as there’s coffee on the way,” Connor chimed in, another yawn already half-way out his mouth. Kevin turned around worriedly, catching his eyes. “I’m okay, Kevin,” he answered the silent question with a raised hand and knowing smirk. “Just a little tired this morning, that’s all.”

“You sure?” Kevin asked, his voice softer now. He unclasped his arm from Arnold and pulled back from the group to properly observe Connor’s state. The redhead knew he must have looked like a tired, rumpled mess, but it was worth it, of course, for Kevin—his Kevin. “You don’t look so great.”

“You’re welcome,” Connor deadpanned as he placed a hand to the small of Kevin’s back. “What a lovely compliment.”

“You sure?” Kevin asked, his voice softer now. He unclasped his arm from Arnold and pulled back from the group to properly observe Connor’s state. The redhead knew he must have looked like a tired, rumpled mess, but it was worth it, of course, for Kevin—his Kevin. “You don’t look so great.”

“Why, thank you,” Connor deadpanned as he placed a hand to the small of Kevin’s back. “What a lovely compliment.”

“There’s a coffee shop on the way to Adventureland,” Kevin offered. “We’ll hit that first, okay?”

“That sounds amazing.” Connor grinned and gave Kevin a little push back into the group. “Now lead us to the promised land, Disney boy.”

Kevin seemed to accept his answer because he just flashed a warm smile and ran to speed up in front of the others, clasping a hand into Charlie’s as he did so. He then leaned down and whispered something into her ear. It must have been something good because soon she was jumping up and down in happy excitement.

It was going to be a long day, Connor thought with a sigh—a long, long day. But any day that had Kevin smiling like that, in the way he was right then—big and wide and far too excited—was guaranteed to be a good day, in Connor’s book. As they walked onward, the sounds of laughter and
happy chatter all around them, Kevin took a moment to glance back at Connor; his brown eyes shimmering, soft and grateful.

*Oh, yes,* Connor thought—this was going to be a very good day, indeed.

Six hours later

“You’re going on this ride with me and that’s that,” Kevin announced to a very cranky, very overtired, very sunburnt Connor McKinley. “I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

“Kevin,” Connor sighed, exasperated, as he yanked his arm back. “I just don’t *do* these kinds of rides, okay?”

He’d gotten to spend the past hour leisurely sipping on his fourth iced coffee of the day while Kevin and the rest of the gang rode Space Mountain not once, but *two* times. Now most of the group was heading off to go grab some ice cream and browse the shops before they’d have to take the monorail over to Epcot.

Except for Kevin. Because Kevin wanted to ride Space Mountain *again*, like a goddamn child. He was a *child*.

“It’s not as scary as I made it sound, I *promise,*” Kevin said, really dragging out the *promise*.

“So you were just lying when you told me it’s a super fast rollercoaster with dark tunnels and lots of hills that’s too scary for Charlie to even go on?” Connor said, challenging him with narrowed eyes. “Good Mormons don’t lie, Kevin. And word has it you’re still a pretty good Mormon.”

“Okay, you’re totally twisting my words around. That’s not what I said,” Kevin said, holding up a finger in protest. His smirk was playful and just a tad bit wry. It was a look Connor hadn’t seen on him in quite some time. It suited him. “I *said* they won’t *let* Charlie on. But she *wants* to go. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“No.” Connor shook his head. “There’s no way in Hell I’m going on the dark tunnel death coaster and that’s that.”

“Oh my God, you are such a—“

“I swear, Kevin, if you call me a wimp *one* more time, I’ll…,” he paused a moment, gritting his teeth. He honestly couldn’t even think of a good retort since, in truth, he’d never do anything to hurt Kevin Price. “I’ll eat *all* the leftover snacks in the room so you won’t have *any* left for the plane ride home tomorrow.” He nodded in finality. That outta show him.

Kevin did an exasperated *thing* with his body and put on a pouty face. He was twenty-eight years old and still had the nerve to use a *pouty* face.

“Come on, Connor,” he whined—*whined.* “No one else wants to—“

“Kevin Price,” Connor cut him off, using his sternest District Leader voice. He attempted to stand a little taller, arms folded across his chest. “Don’t you remember the rule? I’ll *only* go on rides if
Charlie goes because if a five-year-old can do it, then so can I.” He straightened out his shoulders a bit. “I may not like rides, Kevin, but I do have some dignity left, thank you very much.”

Kevin just sighed. “Are you done yet?”

Connor thought for a moment before nodding confidently, quite pleased with himself. “Yes.”

“Good, because we really need to get on line before it gets any longer.”

Kevin’s grin was evil—evil—as he pulled Connor towards the line. The redhead looked back at his friends for help, silently begging them to save him, to do something to end his lunacy, but everyone just grinned at him, instead. Some of them had the audacity to mockingly wave goodbye to him, like the wonderful, yet gravely unhelpful, friends they were. Chris, the jerk, even gave him a sarcastic double thumbs up. God, his best friend could be such an asshole sometimes.

Connor groaned, muttering a curse, as he allowed Kevin to drag him by the wrist. He could have resisted, sure, but he’d honestly follow Kevin Price wherever he wanted to go. Besides, he’d looked it up on Google earlier while the rest of the group was riding—just out of morbid curiosity and boredom—and apparently no one’s ever actually died while riding Space Mountain, so his chances of survival were looking quite good. Even so, he made sure to glance back at Chris, with that shit-eating grin on his face, and raise him the middle finger. Chris keeled over from laughter, making Connor’s lip twitch upwards. He loved his friends so much. It was a shame they probably wouldn’t be seeing each other again, all together like this, for quite some time.

Once they were inside the building, alone and idly waiting on line for the ride, Connor took the opportunity to properly assess how Kevin Price was holding up, given everything that had happened. He looked okay, for the most part, but Connor could tell he was still exhausted, despite all of his cheerful “last day at Disney” enthusiasm. Ever since they woke up that morning, he’d been aching to say something comforting to Kevin, to tell him that it would all be alright, that everything was okay, that last night was okay, that they were okay, that they were always, always okay—even when they’d fight, they were always okay. But, he just wasn’t sure what to say. What could he possibly say to fix any of this? He was confident things would get better, in time, but the wound was still fresh and Connor just wanted to do something about it.

Despite their effortless banter earlier while with the group, Kevin’s eyes quickly darted away from Connor’s the moment they found themselves alone together. The brunette tried to busy himself with a game on his phone, possibly as a way to pass the time as they waited, but it was more likely that he felt uncomfortable being alone with Connor. It hadn’t even occurred to him that things might actually be... awkward between them now. But he didn’t want them to be awkward or uncomfortable or tense. They’d come too far, been through too much together, to allow that to happen.

“Hey,” Connor said, softly, and tapped Kevin’s shoulder, startling him a little.

The brunette quickly shoved his phone away and looked up, staring expectantly at Connor. He looked worried, Connor thought, and anxious, too. Not that that was anything new—this was Kevin, after all—but he didn’t seem worried or anxious in the way he usually seemed worried and anxious. No, it was different now. He seemed anxious about something else entirely.

Kevin awkwardly cleared his throat. “Hey.”

“I just wanted to check in to see how you’re holding up, that’s all,” Connor said as they moved up with the line. “You look downright exhausted.”

“So do you,” Kevin said, bumping his shoulder into Connor’s.
Connor felt the corner of his lip turn up into a half-smile. “Fair point,” he said, and bumped him back.

“I’m doing okay,” Kevin sighed in a tone that led Connor to believe he was obviously not doing okay but was trying to sound convincing anyway. “I’m just… trying not to think about it too much, you know? At least, not until we get back home.”

Connor nodded in understanding. He knew it was going to be a lot to deal with, going back home and trying to sort all this out. And Kevin Price certainly deserved one last amazing day in Disney World, a day where he didn’t need to worry about anything—anything at all. Who was he kidding—Kevin Price deserved a lot of amazing days at Disney World, but unfortunately, right now, they only had this one.

“I forgot to say thank you, by the way,” Kevin went on, his tone quiet. “For last night, I mean. For everything. For helping me and listening to me go on and on about—.” He looked down to his feet with a light blush. “Well, about you know,” he shrugged.

“Kevin.” Connor placed a delicate hand to the other man’s shoulder. “You don’t have to thank me for that, silly. I wanted to know. I needed to know. I’m the one who forced it out of you, remember? I’m just… so glad you finally told me, that’s all.” He paused for a moment, worriedly biting his bottom lip. “I just hope it made you feel a little better, that’s all. Because if it didn’t, then I just—”

“—no, it did. It really did. I never thought I’d tell that story to anyone, least of all you,” Kevin admitted. The comment stung, but Connor knew it hadn’t come from a bad place—just an honest place. He shrugged it off. “But it actually did feel kind of good to get it out, you know?” He paused a moment, swallowing hard, and looked back up to meet Connor’s eyes. “You’ve really given me a lot to think about, Connor McKinley.”

Connor hesitated a moment. “Is that a good thing?” He sure as heck hoped it was a good thing. Please be a good thing.

“Of course it’s a good thing,” Kevin said, as though the question was downright silly with an all-too-obvious answer. He cocked his head to the side and looked deep into Connor’s eyes for a moment. Kevin’s eyes were warm and inviting, silently telling Connor everything he needed to know, which was not to worry. “It’s just that I’ve been doing what I’ve been doing for so long now. I just… need some time to think about everything, that’s all.”

“I know.” Connor nodded in understanding, even though he honestly wanted nothing more than to lay a big fat kiss to the other man’s lips. Oh, how we wanted to. But, he knew he couldn’t. Not yet, anyway. No, he knew he had to wait. He promised Kevin that he’d wait. And he would.

“But, we’re okay, right?” Kevin asked, looking worried again. “You and me?”

“Always.” Connor reached out and took the man’s hand into his own, giving it a squeeze. They walked up the line a bit more, a comfortable silence enveloping them. Until Kevin had to go and make it awkward again.

“So, does it have to be all weird now?” Kevin asked, scratching at his head in that nervous way he did sometimes when he wasn’t sure what to do. “Between us? Because I’m not really sure how we’re supposed to act now, you know? I mean, we’re not friends, exactly, because we’re more than that, but—but we’re not together either. So I’m just worried that everything is going to be—”

He stopped speaking upon the realization that Connor had started giggling. The brunette’s smile faltered, looking agitated now, as though a sudden burst of laughter was the exact opposite of what
he was expecting.

“What are you laughing at?”

“You,” Connor said and leaned into Kevin’s side. He rested his cheek against his shoulder, wrapped an arm around his waist, and pulled him in close. Kevin resisted a little, but Connor didn’t want to let go.

“What’s so funny?” Kevin asked again, confused. Connor couldn’t see his face anymore, but he could hear the scowl in his voice. “That wasn’t supposed to be funny, Connor. If anything, that was supposed to be the complete opposite of funny.”

“I know,” Connor said through a subsiding chuckle, giving Kevin a squeeze. “That’s why it’s funny. You’re funny, you big dope.” He pulled his face out of Kevin’s shoulder and gave him a bop right on the nose. “Cute, too.”

“I am not funny,” he retorted and began fighting harder against the hug, trying to push Connor off of him in a huff. He looked a bit unnerved at the close contact, making Connor realize that perhaps Kevin wasn’t quite ready for that level of affection just yet—and especially not in public.

Dually noted, thought Connor, as he unwrapped his arm from Kevin’s waist. He wasn’t going to get upset or angry anymore whenever Kevin pushed him away like that. No, not anymore. Because now he finally understood it. He understood it all too well. He had no right to get angry. Not anymore.

“You’re just so silly sometimes, Kevin Price,” Connor said, his tone taking on a softer, comforting tone. “We’re doing fine exactly like this. Nothing needs to change, Kevin—not until you’re ready for it to change. And when you are… well, you just let me know. Okay?”

“Really?” Kevin’s face softened. “You mean that?”

“Of course I mean it,” he said. “So, will you please just relax and try to enjoy our last day at Disney World? Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah, but I just…,” Kevin looked down, fidgeting anxiously with his hands. “I mean, I told you all of my secrets. You know everything now.” He bit his lip and lowered his voice to a soft whisper. “And that’s a big deal for me, Connor. You have… no idea how big. I’ve never told anyone that story before. I mean, I even told you I….” he paused and took a moment to nervously glance around at all the people. They were surrounded by the buzzing, droning chatter of hundreds of voices, all combining to make white noise, and yet, still, Kevin opted to lower his voice to a barely audible whisper. “I told you I… love you.”

Connor felt a sudden wave of tears prickle behind his eyes at the word love. “Yeah,” he said with a sad smile. “You did.”

“And?” Kevin waved his hands in the air, exasperated. “I mean, shouldn’t it be all weird and awkward between us now? I mean, after so many years of fighting, we can’t just—”

“We can just,” Connor whispered, resting a delicate finger to his lips, just to shut him up for a minute. He then took Kevin’s hand into his and led him up to the ride entrance. He watched Kevin’s mouth open and close a few times, clearly not quite sure what to say to that. Connor loved rendering Kevin Price speechless. It was quite fun.

Space Mountain, on the other hand, scared the living bejesus out of him.
As they boarded the ride car, Connor could feel his breakfast creeping back up around his throat. This was definitely *not* a good idea. No, this was a very, very *bad* idea, indeed.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Connor muttered under his breath. His eyes were clamped shut, hands white-knuckling the lap bar. “I’m going to *hate* this because I *hate* rollercoasters. They’re not *fun*, Kevin; they’re terrifying. *Fun* is eating copious amounts of ice cream and riding the merry-go-round. That’s fun. This is... let’s see how long it takes for Connor to piss himself.”

“I don’t know, that sounds pretty fun to me,” Kevin teased, to which Connor just turned and glared at him. “Oh, shush. You’re gonna love it.”

He felt Kevin’s hand wrap around his thigh, giving it a quick, reassuring squeeze. The hand was gone in under a second, but it still made a warm tingle-y feeling shoot up his spine, nonetheless.

After a moment, he felt his breakfast take another violent surge up towards his throat. “Oh, God,” he swallowed, pushing the contents of his stomach back down. “I *really* think I might puke.”

“We’re been over this a thousand times, Connor. You are *not* allowed to puke on the rides.”

He felt himself being hurled back a bit as the ride started up, the click-ety-clack-ety-clang sounds of the tracks sounding positively *unsettling*.

“Jeez, it sounds like they haven’t updated this thing in, like… twenty years or something,” Kevin said in a fake worried voice, probably just to freak Connor out. “I hope we make it out alive.”

“Not funny,” the redhead growled through gritted teeth. “Assuming we do survive this thing; I’m *seriously* going to punch you in the face afterwards. Hard, and without mercy.”

“Deal.”

Connor didn’t end up puking, thank God—he just screamed his head off throughout the entire ride, much like he always did. But, by the end, he was laughing just as hard as Kevin, hair winded and grin practically touching his ears, and he never did make good on that threat of punching him in the face.

“Okay, sweetie,” Kevin said to Charlie as they walked into one of the shops in Tomorrowland. “Are you ready to buy your *very* first Disney pin?”

“Yeah!” She cried out, flailing her arms around like she did whenever she got *really* excited about something. Her enthusiasm over buying her first Disney pin had Kevin Price positively beaming like an over-the-moon idiot.

“Good,” he said. “Because a little birdy told me they have the *Moana* set here.”

“*Moana*!” Charlie squealed, jumping up and down. “I want Moana!”

The ‘little birdy’ had, in fact, been one of the very kind and gracious Disney World employees who’d just served them all scoops of ice cream about twenty minutes prior. Apparently, the brand new *Moana* pin pack was a bit hard to find, but she let them know she’d spotted one in this particular shop.
The little girl was in awe of everything, her eyes wide and gleaming with a wonder that only a child could manage. When they reached the glass counter that contained the vast array of Disney pins and sets, Kevin lifted the little girl up to sit on his hip so she could get a better look.

“Oooh!” She cried out and pointed down at the counter with her chubby little finger. “Look, Daddy!”

“I see,” he grinned. “But, first we need to pick you out a lanyard,” he instructed as he ran his free hand over the rack of various Disney-themed lanyards. “Ah, here we go,” he hummed and pulled out a bright pink one, speckled with tiny designs of several Disney Princesses. “How about this one?”

Charlie let out another squeal as she eagerly grabbed at the item, answering Kevin’s question without any words needed. Letting her take it from his hands, he pointed to the strap. “So, once you get your pins,” he explained. “You can trade them for different ones. Whichever pins you want to trade, you pin right onto here. Then you can trade with people, even the Disney characters. You understand?”

She nodded happily and clutched the item tightly to her chest. He was pretty sure she didn’t quite understand, but that was okay. By the time she was old enough to understand how to trade pins, he was sure they would have a lot more Disney pins between the two of them.

After doing some digging, they managed to find the Moana set, much to Charlie’s delight. Kevin still had a little bit of vacation fun money leftover, so he went ahead and splurged on a self-indulgent present for himself—a silver and gold Disney pin collector’s book and a set of starter pins for himself from classic Disney films. He’d only ever been to Disney World a couple of times in his life and never before had he considered collecting the pins. But, now that he had Charlie, he knew they’d be coming here a lot more often and he kind of liked the idea of buying a brand new pin every time they came. He bought a collector’s book for Charlie too, a purple one with Minnie Mouse on the front, for when she’d inevitably have too many pins to fit on the lanyard.

As they were leaving the shop, Kevin reached into their little shopping bag with his free hand and un-plucked the Moana pin from the lanyard, snipping it to the front of Charlie’s shirt.

“There you go. Now, when you see the real Moana,” he said, hoping to God they would finally see Moana before the day was over. “You can show her your new pin, okay?” He gave her tummy a little poke.

“Yeah!” Charlie nodded with a big, drool-y grin. She was still perched snugly atop his hip and seized the opportunity to plant a sloppy, wet kiss right to his cheek.

“What was that for?” Kevin smiled softly, giving her tiny body a tender squeeze.

“I love you, Daddy.”

Kevin was certain his heart had just melted into a giant puddle of goo at his daughter’s words and it took every ounce of his being—every last ounce—not to break out crying.

It was a little after five o’clock in the afternoon now, almost time for them to head over to Epcot, but the gang wanted to go on one last ride before leaving Magic Kingdom.

Connor chose to sit this one out. He was so done with the rides. Kevin had made him go on not one,
but three, rides that Connor would have normally deemed out of the question. Luckily, they’d also been afforded some easier ones such as It’s a Small World (for Charlie), the Mad Tea Party and Peter Pan’s Flight. Those ones were definitely more Connor's speed.

He’d just finished telling Kevin no more rides, so now he was just lazily sipping on a frozen pina colada with Chris by his side as they leisurely perused the shops. He didn’t want to go home without at least a few souvenirs, that was for sure. Charlie and Kevin had spent the past hour gushing over their new Disney pin sets. It nearly made Connor want to buy a pack for himself. This was his very first trip to Disney World, after all, and he didn’t want to go home empty-handed.

“Ooh, come ‘ere! Take a look at this,” Connor said excitedly as he held up a rather short Lion King crop top that said Hakuna Matata on the front. Chris just gaped at it as though it were diseased. “Well, what do you think? Could I pull this off or what?”

“Umm, no, definitely not,” Chris said. He looked visibly disturbed at the suggestion. “And I’m pretty sure that’s for kids, Connor. Put that thing back.”

After bickering back and forth for a bit about clothing limitations on those about to push thirty, Connor begrudgingly put it back on the rack. He took in a big slurp of his almost-empty pina colada as he perused a few more items in the rack.

“Soogoo,” Chris sang as he sauntered up next to Connor. “Are you ever going to tell me what happened between you two last night or what?”

“Ugh, do we have to talk about that right now?” Connor sighed. “I happen to be enjoying myself.”

“Really?” Chris asked. “Because no offense, Connor, but you look like shit.”

“Gee, thanks,” he said, rolling his eyes. “You’re about the third person to tell me that today.”

“No, but seriously, what the Hell happened between you two last night?” Chris asked again as he followed Connor around to another rack. “Word has it you got in after one in the morning and Charlie slept in Arnold’s room. Something must have happened. Now, spill it.”

The redhead just gave a shy shrug and turned away from Chris, pretending to be very interested in another too-small crop top that was most certainly meant for someone half his size.

“What makes you think something happened?”

“Seriously?” Now it was Chris’s turn to roll his eyes. “Maybe because you two went from trying to kill each other every five seconds to making googly eyes at each other? Oh, and don’t think I missed that not-so-discreet hand holding at breakfast this morning. Something’s up and you’re just not telling me.” He folded his arms across his chest in an effort to look more serious. “I am your best friend, you know. I know when something’s up and something is definitely up.”

“Okay, first of all, Kevin and I were absolutely not making ‘googly eyes’ at each other,” Connor snorted. “And we weren’t holding hands at breakfast, either. It was more like a… reassuring pat.”

“Come on, Connor, be serious,” Chris sighed. His expression turned worried. “You’re not back together with him, are you? Please… please just tell me you’re not back together.”

“We’re not back together.”

“Because—oh, wait… you’re not?” Chris asked, sounding sort of surprised. He let out a giant sigh of relief. “Well, that’s good to hear.”
“—yet,” Connor added with a smirk before darting away from Chris to inspect a different clothing rack. He’d said it just to drive him crazy, really. Chris would need to lighten up on Kevin if any of this was going to have a chance in Hell at working out. He knew Chris would come around, eventually, but damn did the man know how to hold a grudge.

“Yes?” Chris huffed and ran up behind Connor. “Did you just say yet? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means we’re not back together,” Connor said, gesturing to nothing with his now-empty pina colada cup. “Yet.”

“I’m gonna need more than that, Connor,” his friend demanded. “Give me the details, please. I need to know what I’m up against here.”

“What you’re up against?” Connor said, raising a questioning brow. “You do realize how crazy that sounds, right? This is Kevin we’re talking about here. We like Kevin, remember? We spent two whole years of our lives with Kevin.”

“Come on, you know what I meant.” He sighed. “Look, I just need to know if I need to start worrying about you again, that’s all.”

“You always need to worry about me,” Connor smiled sadly. “I’m a mess, remember?”

“Right, but are you you’re usual mess or are you an ‘I’m thinking about getting back together with Kevin even though it’s a terrible idea’ kind of a mess?” When Connor didn’t answer, he prodded again. “Well? Which is it?”

“I don’t know,” Connor shrugged with a guilty look on his face. “Maybe the second one?”

“I knew it!” His friend cried. He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes to probably try and gain some composure. “I knew you were getting sucked back into this. I knew it from the first day we set foot in Disney. You told me you weren’t, but I knew you were. I knew it.”

“Chris,” Connor sighed and attempted to calm him down by placing a hand to his shoulder. When Chris finally opened his eyes and met Connor’s, the redhead could see they weren’t filled with even the slightest trace of malice. His friend was just very, very worried. “You don’t need to worry about me, okay? It’s going to be different this time. I know it.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Because,” Connor said, his voice low and desperate. “I can feel it. In here.” He pressed a hand to his heart. “I know it’s hard for you to understand, but there’s a lot you still don’t know about this whole thing. Just please trust me on this, okay? This is going to be a good thing.” He paused for a moment to try and make his point. “I need this to be a good thing. And I know you’re worried about me and I get that, I really do, but, please just… have some faith in me, okay? Because you’re my best friend and I need to know I have your support on this.”

“Oh, come on, Connor,” Chris waved him off with a rosy blush, as though everything Connor had just asked of him should have been a given. “You know I always have your back, dummy. It’s just… I still don’t trust him, that’s all. After what he did to you, it’s just hard to trust him after that. But, I do trust you, so if you say it’s going to be different this time, then… well, then I guess it’s going to be different this time. I’ll try not to worry so much.”

“Good.”
“But.” He held up a finger. “I still don’t have to like it.”

“Fair enough.” Connor wrapped an arm around his best friend’s shoulders with a grin and led him back over to where they first came in. He picked up the previously-discarded *Hakuna Matata* crop top off the rack and held it up in front of Chris. “Now, do I also have your support on this awesome new crop top I’m about to buy or what?”

“You’re a twenty-eight-year-old man with forty inch hips,” Chris deadpanned, as though the answer should have been obvious.

Connor glanced longingly back at the top. “So that means…?”

“No.”

“But is that like a hard no or—?”

“No, it’s more like an… *oh my fucking God, Connor, absolutely not* kind of a no.”

“**For the hundredth time, Arnold,**” Kevin sighed, wishing his best friend would just *stop* asking him the *same* question over and over and over again. “Connor and I are *not* back together. I mean, not yet, anyway.”

He and Arnold were walking out of one of the shops and into the street, shopping bags in hand and kids walking ahead in front. They were headed for the monorail, where they would meet up with the rest of the group at precisely six o’clock and head over to Epcot together.

“Not *yet,*” Arnold nodded. “Okay, but then what’s with all the secret hand holding and weird looks and stuff?”

“Okay, I know you have a vivid imagination and all,” Kevin said. “But we were definitely *not* holding hands.”

Throughout the entire day, Arnold and Naba had been asking him question after question about what went on the night before with Connor. Up until last night, Arnold had been the only one to know most of the truth about what happened to Kevin, back when everything fell apart, but even Arnold didn’t know the *whole* truth. He would tell him, one day—just not today.

“But I’m guessing the date must have gone well then, right? Since, now you’re all ‘not *yet*’ instead of just... ‘*not*.’”

“First of all, it *wasn’t* a date. Second of all—”

“*Dude,*” Arnold sighed. "Don't play dumb with me, Kev. It was definitely a date and everyone and their mother knows it."

Kevin sighed. This was hopeless.

But just as Kevin was about to really lay into him about why it most certainly was *not* a date, they ran into the one person Kevin and Charlie had been hoping to meet the entire trip—*Moana.* She was standing off to the side, alongside a few other Disney characters, with a long line of eager kids waiting to get their pictures taken.
“Daddy!” Charlie screeched, pointing to Moana. “It’s Moana! It’s Moana!”

Before Kevin could even answer her desperate cries, she was already running full speed ahead towards Moana, cutting the entire line because—well, because she just didn’t know any better. She was jumping up and down in front of Moana, tugging on her Hawaiian print skirt. Moana looked kind, but the guard beside her began searching the crowd for the parent of the disobedient child.

“Charlie!” Kevin called out and raced over to collect his child. But by the time he made it over there, Charlie was already hugging Moana’s leg. Kevin reached out and grabbed her, lifting her up and apologizing profusely. “I’m so sorry. She just... really loves Moana. We’re gonna go... get on line.”

But the mom who was next in line graciously waved to Kevin, motioning for him to go ahead of her in line, to which Kevin and Charlie were both very grateful. And Charlie finally got her picture, of which Kevin took about ten or more. She even got to show off all of her new Disney pins to Moana.

And Kevin—well, Kevin got to see that look on Charlie's face; the look that can only come from meeting one's favorite Disney princess.

The group was back together, leisurely wandering around Epcot now, on their way to dinner. The sun was beginning to recede beneath the horizon; the light breeze in the air, cool and calm. Arnold’s hand was locked with Nabulungi’s, James’s with Chris’s, Kevin’s with Charlie’s and Charlie’s to Connor’s. It had been a wonderful day, Kevin thought to himself with a satisfied sigh. He’d gotten his fill of some of his favorite Disney rides, had a pack on his back chock full of souvenirs, including his new Disney pin collector’s book. His friends were all laughing and chit-chatting with one another, one continuous slew of old inside jokes and light bickering that could only come from having known each other for so many years. Charlie was grinning like no tomorrow, a lanyard full of Moana pins dangling from her neck and a bit of ice cream spillage from earlier staining her purple Frozen tee. She looked overwhelmingly happy, with her auburn curls bobbing to and fro, happy squeals and ooohs and ahhs coming from her tiny mouth as they walked. That, in and of itself, was enough to make all of Kevin’s worries fade away to the back of his mind, as though they were now light-years away, in a place he wouldn’t need to visit again until he got back home.

They had a delicious dinner filled with margaritas and enchiladas and more at La Hacienda de San Angel in the Mexico section of the park. Connor bought one of those interesting glass sugar skulls and they all rode this little gondola ride that was set up inside the restaurant. Amazingly, no one was cranky or overly tired anymore and none of the kids had broken out crying yet—it was really just a magical night spent with good friends.

After dinner, they all got fresh drinks and headed down to stand beside lake, where they’d watch their last fireworks show of the trip. Kevin and Arnold took the kids to a nearby stand to buy one of those giant Disney balloons that had a colorful Mickey Mouse inside of it. After all, Kevin had promised Charlie he’d get her one before the trip was over.

As they were walking back to re-join the group, the kids gushing to each other about their new balloons and pins and whatnot, Kevin spotted the man he recognized to be Sven—the blonde, good-looking Swedish man they’d met their first night in Disney. He was standing next to Connor, the latter of whom was laughing with rosy cheeks at something funny he'd just said. As the man reached up and touched Connor's shoulder, Kevin felt a sharp surge of jealousy shoot through him. He knew
he had no right to be jealous. They were just talking, after all, and besides, he and Connor weren’t even back together yet—not yet, anyway. He’d sort of assumed they were headed in that direction, though, if the events of last night had been any indication.

“Let’s stay over here,” Kevin suddenly said to Arnold, gripping his shoulder to stop him in his tracks. They were still a few yards away from Connor and the group.

“Why?” Arnold asked, confused. He then followed the direction of Kevin's gaze until his eyes landed on Connor and Sven. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Kev, I really think they’re just talking,” he said. “Connor wouldn’t do anything to hurt you. They probably just bumped into each other, that’s all.”

“I know,” Kevin admitted, mostly to convince himself. He honestly felt as though he might break out crying at any moment as he watched Sven lightly caress Connor’s upper arm, which was mostly bare, save for a bit of cloth on his shoulder. “I just can’t deal with this right now.”

“Oh, buddy,” Arnold said and gently took his friend’s hand, giving it a squeeze. “We’ll just stay right here, okay?”

Kevin nodded and darted his gaze away from Connor and Sven—God, how he hated Sven. It was a totally unfounded and unreasonable hatred, but he didn’t care. He still hated the man with every fiber of his being—his stupid accent and his lush blonde hair and the way he touched Connor all over, so freely and openly, without ever asking for permission. But Kevin supposed that, with Connor, the man didn’t really need to ask for permission, did he? No, Connor had certainly gotten a lot looser with his sexuality over the years; unlike Kevin, who hadn’t even so much as kissed another person in almost five years. Well, unless you counted the chaste kisses he’d received from Naba and Charlie and his mother. He was fairly certain those didn’t count.

“Five years,” he muttered aloud to himself, shaking his head and slamming his eyes shut. “I can’t believe it’s been five years.”

“What’s that, buddy?” Arnold asked as he bent down to lift his son up into his arms, balancing him on his hip. “What’s been five years?”

“Nothing.” Kevin blushed with the sudden realization that he’d actually been speaking out loud. “It’s… nothing.”

Arnold shrugged and glanced around. “Okay, I really need to go find Naba. I’ll be right back, okay, bud? Then we’ll watch the fireworks.”

Kevin nodded and turned around to face the lake. He allowed his eyes to just gaze out onto the serene waters, taking a quiet moment to himself, to calm down and just appreciate the raw beauty and splendor of their surroundings. He wouldn’t look back at Connor flirting with Sven. Well, he assumed they were flirting, anyway. He’d heard Connor’s laugh loud and clear—it was his flirting laugh.

With a sad sigh, he glanced down at his little girl, who was holding tightly onto her new Mickey balloon. And he found himself smiling again, in spite of everything, because of her. He reached out and wiggled his fingers in her direction, beckoning her to take his hand. She did, of course, with a big, toothy grin, and he gave her tiny hand a squeeze. He was about to lean down and say something to her, something about how the fireworks they were about to watch were sure to be awesome, when
a voice crept up behind him.

“Hey,” he heard the voice say. A warm hand was then suddenly touching his back, startling him. He recognized it immediately—it was Connor’s.

“Oh, hey,” Kevin said with a jump. “You startled me.”

Connor just smirked. “You must get easily startled.”

Kevin had never been very good at controlling his temper, so he just sneered and turned away from Connor, in favor of looking back out at the water.

“Whoa, what’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s ‘gotten into me’,” Kevin snapped. “What are you doing over here anyway? I thought you were busy talking to Sven.”

He knew he’d given away his true feelings on the matter by the way the man’s stupid name had rolled off his tongue, disparaging and with contempt, but he didn’t really care. His body was seething with hatred for Sven and his sultry European accent and all handsome men with sultry European accents, for that matter, and don’t even get him started on the country of Sweden itself.

“Ah,” Connor let out a soft sigh. “So that’s what this is about.”

Kevin just rolled his eyes, keeping them focused on the lake instead of Connor. He just couldn’t look at Connor right now. But then there was that hand—touching him—this time on his arm.

“Kevin,” Connor said, gently. “Would it make you feel any better if I told you that I just finished telling Sven that, although I’m beyond flattered that he seems to find me so attractive, I must politely decline his invitation to watch the fireworks together because I happen to be quite fond of… someone else?”

Kevin’s eyes felt as though they’d nearly popped out of his head. He abruptly turned to meet Connor’s eyes, sparkling blue and amused and all-knowing, the way they always seemed to do in moments like these. The lake in front of them may have looked quite beautiful, with the moon and stars twinkling above, radiant in the night sky, and the distant, colorful lights of Disney World glowing all around them, but Connor’s eyes—Connor’s eyes had them all beat by a long shot.

Connor’s smirk turned haughty again. “Someone with,” he reached up and grazed a hand over the flop of hair that had fallen down over Kevin’s eyes, gently brushing it back. “The softest brown hair that’s always flopping down over his silly face,” he let his hand fall and trail over Kevin’s shoulder, “and who has at least five pairs of Mickey Mouse ears back at home, possibly more,” he said before moving his hand to run down his arm, “and who just so happens to be the most amazing father to the sweetest little girl I’ve ever met in my whole life.” He leaned in just to smirk closer to Kevin’s face. “Now who on Earth could that be?”

Kevin swallowed hard at the unexpected slew of compliments. Not knowing what to say, he just stepped back a bit, away from Connor, letting the pale, slender hand fall from his shoulders. He looked down towards his feet.

“You didn’t have to tell Sven to leave.” He shook his head, ashamed now of his own jealous behavior. “I was being stupid. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Connor shrugged, a tiny smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He bumped his shoulder into Kevin’s. “I kinda like it when you’re jealous.”
Kevin’s first instinct was to defend himself and say that he was absolutely not jealous—no way—not now, not ever. But he quickly realized that he couldn’t really do that anymore, could he? Because now, Connor knew the truth—the whole truth about all of his feelings. Even if Kevin wasn’t ready to fully express them yet, out in the open like this, Connor still knew they were there, lingering behind his eyes. It wasn’t a secret any more. No, now Connor knew everything, knew about the little bluebird buried deep inside his chest, the one constantly yearning, begging, to escape, but Kevin would just keep on pressing it down—down, down, further and further, into the darkness, until he could barely even hear it’s call anymore. He’d only let it escape every once in a while, in very strange and dire circumstances, like last night, with Connor. He knew he’d have to learn how to let it out eventually. He had to. If he was going to have any chance at being happy again, with Connor, he’d have to.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Connor said and reached into his bag to retrieve something. “I bought you two a couple souvenirs at the store.”

“Oh?” Kevin grinned as he tried to peer over at the gifts in Connor’s hands. Each gift was wrapped up inside a little Disney bag with pink tissue paper. Kevin bent down and scooped Charlie up into his arms, letting her sit atop his hip. “Look, Uncle Connor got you a present.”

“Ooh!” Her eyes light up almost immediately. "Gimmee, gimmee!"

“Hey, be polite,” Kevin chastised her, giving her belly a poke. “What do you say when someone buys you a present, huh?”

“Oh! Thank you,” she said sweetly, but still made grabby hands towards the item. Kevin snatched the balloon out of her hands, to be safe. It looked ready to escape.

“No problem, sweetie.” Connor handed her the little bag. “It’s not much,” he shrugged. “But I just felt like buying you guys a little something. I hope you like it.”

Charlie made a slew of giddy noises as she pulled out a little Winnie the Pooh figurine from the gift bag.

“It’s Winnie the Pooh!” She cried. “Look, Daddy! It’s Winnie the Pooh!”

“I see it, I see it.” He gently took it out of her hands and turned it over in his own. There was an inscription at the bottom. “Look, sweetie. It says: Any day spent with you is my favorite day. So, today is my new favorite day.”

Kevin’s voice grew softer as he read the words etched into the gift, his heart doing a little backflip in his chest. He slowly looked up from the item to give Connor what he really hoped was a meaningful look, a look that would say more with his eyes than he’d ever be able to muster out of his mouth because his mouth, unfortunately, still could only say whatever his brain would allow it to say and his brain—the blasted, broken thing—was still rather messed up and confused and trying really hard not to feel things.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that.” Connor blushed and waved Kevin off. “It happens to be the truth.” He leaned down and gave Charlie a small peck on the cheek. Upon pulling back, he said, “you’ve made my very first Disney trip extra special, you know that?”

Charlie’s face lit up into a grin at Connor’s words, but quickly turned sad. “Uncle Connor?” She asked, her bottom lip now jutting out into a pout. “When will I see you again?”

The expression on Connor’s face changed the moment the words fell from her lips, going from
happy to hurting in the span of an instant. “We’ll see each other real soon, sweetie,” he nodded with a sad smile. “Maybe not right away, but we’ll see each other again, I promise.”

“Yay!” Charlie squealed and reached out with her hands, beckoning him to come back into her for a little hug. She grabbed ahold of Connor’s head, pulling him close, her little chubby fingers entangling with his reddish strands. Kevin heard Connor giggle the moment Charlie gave the top of his head a kiss.

Kevin felt bombarded with emotions as he watched them—emotions he was having trouble containing to just his eyes. He wanted to say something to Connor, to say something truthful and real, to tell him how much it meant to him that he cared so much about his daughter, even though they weren’t even back together yet, even though the future was still vague and uncertain, but he just didn’t know the right words to say.

So, he didn’t end up saying a damn thing, except: “Hey, what about mine?” He then pointed to the other gift bag in Connor’s hands. “Don’t I get a gift?”

“Oh, um,” Connor stammered, his cheeks turning rosy again. He looked down for a moment and fiddled with the item in question. “Yeah, but I’d rather you open yours later, if that’s okay.”

“Why does it have to be later?”

Connor shrugged, looking a little embarrassed. “Because… because it’s silly, that’s why…. It’s really, really silly and cheesy and I just…,” he sighed, looking a bit frustrated. “Just open it when you get home, okay? Jeez.” He reached out to reluctantly hand the gift to Kevin, but pulled it back again, as though he didn’t quite trust Kevin’s ability to exude self-control. “Promise me you won’t open it until you get home?”

“I promise. Just give it to me.” Kevin smirked and swiftly grabbed the item in question. He didn’t open it yet, as instructed, but he knew his curiosity would get the better of him soon enough.

They walked back over to rejoin the group, where they were all standing around, laughing and such, looking out over the lake where the fireworks would shortly go off. Michaels was double fisting beers from the German bar because hey, it’s our last day and Arnold had found Naba, the three of them now laughing over something with Harrison and Neeley. The sky had darkened some more, the only illumination being the spattering of light-up Mickey ears and colorful glow sticks, mixed with the murmurings of happy, smiling families and bobbing Mickey balloons.

“So, are we gonna give your mom a call now?” Kevin asked to Connor, upon hearing the first firework go off.

“Oh, yeah,” Connor nodded and pulled his iPad out of his messenger bag.

Connor had told him he wanted to wait until the fireworks show started to FaceTime his ailing mother back in Utah, so she would be able to watch them too. They would probably be the last fireworks of her life—a knowledge that made Kevin’s heart hurt more than he’d expected it to. Mrs. McKinley had always been so kind to him when he was younger, always fussing over him and ironing his shirts and letting him sleep over and visit Connor, even though most religious parents wouldn’t have allowed it, and she’d always let Kevin come over for the holidays too, where she’d cook a big turkey and too many sides. She always piled up Kevin’s plate with more food than he could eat, even after he’d told her he’d eaten too much. Connor’s mom was a good person, he thought – she had been almost like a second mother to him for that little bit of time, during the year he and Connor were still together back in the states. It had been brief, yes, but meaningful nonetheless, and he wanted the chance to tell her how much it meant to him before it was too late.
The redhead grinned as the device called his mother. “She's going to be so excited to see you, you have no idea.”

The comment made Kevin beam like a dummy because, despite it all, he secretly still enjoyed being fawned over and adored, especially by doting elderly relatives and such. It simply made him feel good, for some reason. It seemed as though there were still quite a few things about himself that hadn’t really changed much over the years.

The group huddled close together and watched the fireworks while Connor held up his iPad to show his now-visible mom, who looked quite ill but also ecstatic at seeing her only son’s happy, smiling face and Kevin, too. She asked them question after question about how they were enjoying themselves and how old was Charlie now and what grade was she in and how did the two of them finally make up after all those years of fighting - a question to which they didn't exactly tell the whole truth. Kevin didn’t mind. Mrs. McKinley was happy and Connor was happy and Charlie was happy and that just made everything alright, even if the woman on the screen could barely get a word out because of the loud boom of fireworks and her oxygen tank and her choking. Kevin felt a pang of tears sting behind his eyes every time they had to stop talking because she’d get attacked by a coughing fit. It was uncomfortable and awkward and Kevin had never been very good at dealing with the ill or elderly or sick people in general, but the woman on the screen had treated him like a person, years ago, despite his feelings for Connor, and not just a person, but a son - and that sure meant a whole lot to Kevin.

At some point, Kevin had transferred Charlie into Connor’s arms, so she could say hello to his mother. The redhead had pretty much completely stopped paying attention to the fireworks, in favor of talking to his mom. It made the corner of Kevin’s mouth turn up into a sad smile. He was a good person, too, just like his mother. Despite everything, he knew in his heart that he did love Connor, for exactly who he was, right then - good things and bad things, alike. Not that he ever doubted it, but he’d forced himself to stop thinking about it, forced himself to try and forget his feelings. But they were still there - deep, deep, deep down there, just waiting—begging—to be freed.

Knowing that Connor’s attention was thoroughly occupied, Kevin thought it might be a good chance to take a peek at the gift Connor was acting weird about. He slipped a hand into the little gift bag and pulled out another cheesy knick-knack. He knew Connor was just acting like a crazy paranoid worrywart and that it would be just fine for him to open the gift. He didn’t understand why the other man was acting so weird about it and wanted Kevin to wait until he got home to open it.

Upon pulling out the knick-knack, he saw that it was magnet with Mickey on one side and Minnie on the other.

There was a rather long inscription that read:

Life is too short to wake up in the morning with regrets,

so love the people who treat you right,

forget about the ones who don't,

and believe that everything happens for a reason.

If you get a chance, take it.

If it changes your life, let it.
Nobody said life would be easy, 
they just promised it would be 
worth it.

He kept on reading it, over and over, about five or six times. For a few moments, it felt as though he could no longer move or see or hear the fireworks. He finally regained some motor functions back and glanced up to look at Connor. His ex-boyfriend was holding Charlie in his arms, perched snugly atop his hip, laughing with his mother on FaceTime as his daughter excitedly went on and on about how her daddy had bought her all the Moana pins and how she even got to show the real Moana her pins. She went on and on about it all, in that happy, excited way kids often did when telling a story that means a lot to them. Kevin just stood there for a while, motionless, feeling frozen in space and time, unable to move and unable to think about anything other than the two people in front of him, whom he couldn’t take his eyes off of. Finally, the funk started to wear off and he was able to quickly shove the magnet back into its little bag, so Connor wouldn’t know he’d broken his promise. At least now he understood why Connor was acting so weird about it—it was unexpectedly meaningful.

Pretty soon, Connor was waving over at Kevin, beckoning him to come back and say good-bye to his mother. Wiping his eyes, he walked over and leaned in, so that Mrs. McKinley could properly see his face. He told her about how much he’s been praying for her lately and how he still had hope that her health might improve. He told her about how he really wants to see her again soon, so he could tell her all of these things in person. More importantly, though, he thanked her—he thanked her for always taking care of him whenever he’d come over to their house, upset and crying over something his parents had said to him, and for ironing his dress shirts and for talking to Charlie about Moana and other things and for just being a good person, in general. She told him, of course, as moms often did, that it was no trouble at all and that she hoped to see him again soon, too. Moms like that, like Connor’s mom, made good parenting look so effortless and easy and he often wondered why he couldn’t have been blessed with a mother just like that.

With one last blow-kiss goodbye from Connor, they closed up the iPad and turned back to watch the end of the fireworks show. The display was beautiful, breathtaking even, with the sparkling, exploding arrays of color shooting up, over the water. But tonight, for some reason, Kevin just couldn’t stop looking over at Connor, the colors and shimmering lights from the display shining against his pale skin, reflecting off his blue eyes. Connor, just Connor, was also quite breathtaking. And the way he held Charlie so tightly against his chest, as though he wished he could hold onto her forever, made Kevin feel a lot... it just made him feel a lot. He wasn’t even sure which emotions they were now—not now that everything was backwards and jumbled up and confused. He did know that he felt overcome with the urge to say something, to say something nice and complimentary and sweet to Connor, but he didn’t know how to do that anymore. It had been too long. He’d forgotten all about how to do those things. A thousand murmurings of what he wanted to say, yearned to say, flooded through his brain, but none of them seemed like enough.

So he just turned to Connor and leaned his head down close to his ear, so close that he could feel the little hairs prickling at his nose. “Don’t overthink this, okay?”

Connor turned his head a little. “Don’t overthink what—?”

And then Kevin did a very, very weird thing and leaned in and placed a rather chaste kiss right to Connor’s cheek.
“—hmph!” Connor made a sound. And Kevin couldn’t really decipher what kind of sound it was, but when he pulled back to get a good look at the other man’s face, he supposed it must have been shock because Connor’s face was, indeed, shocked.

“You just... kissed me,” Connor said in a hushed whisper, sounding quite breathless even though they hadn’t even kissed on the lips or anything. It was the same kind of kiss his mom would give him.

“I did,” Kevin said. He wasn’t quite sure why a chaste little kiss to the cheek had suddenly transformed Connor into an out of breath, blubbering mess, but he wasn’t about to question it.

Connor opened his mouth and sputtered again. “In front of people.”

“Right,” Kevin said. “Don’t overthink it, okay?”

“Why—why did you just decide to kiss me like that? In front of people? You wouldn’t even let me hug you before and now you’re—”

“—I don’t know,” Kevin cut him off, feeling his face flush. “It just… felt like the right thing to do.”

“Okay.” Connor nodded and closed his eyes for a moment. His face began to scrunch up. “Oh, yeah, I’m definitely overthinking it.”

“Well, don’t.” Kevin grinned and turned back to watch the rest of the fireworks display.

“Okay,” Connor stammered and turned back as well. Kevin could hear him swallow again. “Okay,” he said to himself with a nod. “Okay, I’m not overthinking it. I’m not overthinking it.”

Kevin smirked and reached out to take his hand. “Yes, you are.”

As they walked back to the hotel after the fireworks, Connor had Charlie wrapped up in his arms again. Kevin offered to take her back several times, especially after she’d fallen asleep over his shoulder, belly pressed to his chest, a bit of spittle drooling out of her mouth and onto his shirt, but he just kept on saying he was okay, that he had it and that he probably wouldn’t be getting to see Charlie again for a little while, so he was going to be selfish and keep her all to himself. Kevin knew it wasn’t selfish—it was the opposite of selfish—but if thinking that made it easier for Connor to deal with all this, then that was okay with Kevin.

The next morning was hard. It was very, very hard. Kevin couldn’t even believe how hard. And getting on the plane—a different one than Connor, unfortunately, since they had booked different flights—was even harder. And it wasn’t even hard for any of the reasons he’d originally expected it to be, when he first arrived in Orlando ten days ago for a fun-filled reunion with his friends. But, somewhere along the line, something changed, inside of him, and it became hard for a whole new set of reasons—reasons he hadn’t expected to ever come up again—ever—for as long as he lived.

Reasons like missing someone and loving someone and wanting to kiss someone—someone named Connor McKinley, who he’d vowed six years ago to never, ever have those feelings for again, to not have those feelings for any man, because it wasn’t worth it—wasn’t worth all the pain and heartache and ill treatment and tears.

But, now, things were different. So different. He felt different, now. And he didn’t want to go back
to the life he had before or wake up the next morning without Connor sleeping in the same room, beside him. He hated the very idea of it. He didn’t want to go back to the life he had before—one of loneliness and solitude and only sharing his life with people when it was convenient and easy and safe for him to do so. He liked that Connor pushed him, pushed him to be stronger, to be braver, to be true to himself. And he was finding himself incredibly grateful for the fact that, this time, he’d pushed Kevin just one step too far.

Everything would change now, he knew, once he got back home. He’d make sure of it. And he knew it wouldn’t be easy—it would be the complete and polar opposite of easy—but he had absolutely no doubt in his mind now that it would be one-hundred-percent worth it.
PART 2 (Home): The Metaphorical Tulip

Chapter Notes

Legend:
*** = Asterisks are memory scenes
___ = Regular lines are present day scenes
Purple Dividers = Kevin POV
Blue Dividers = Connor POV
~ = POV switch within a scene

Feedback makes my day, so if you liked it, let me know! :)

PART TWO

Chapter 10: The Metaphorical Tulip

It was on a Friday when it happened.

Kevin had been going about his morning routine of getting Charlie ready for school; the typical packing of her lunch and getting her dressed and whatnot, all the while explaining to her for the umpteenth time that she could not bring Cuddles (her favorite stuffed animal as of late) to school with her. He had just finished their usual three-mile drive through Kaysville to drop her off at kindergarten and was now on his way to work. He truly disliked his job – it was dull, boring and relatively monotonous – but, at least it was a Friday. A quick stop at the local deli to grab his usual iced coffee and breakfast sandwich and he was back on the road. The weather outside was miserable, the sky dark and dreary, rain coming down hard like it had been doing all week. His commute to work never took less than forty minutes, but a coffee in his hand and music on the radio always made it a tad more enjoyable.

He was at a stoplight now, ripping into his mediocre egg sandwich with one hand, the other casually draped atop the wheel. His head bobbed up and down as he sang along to a classic James Taylor song. His singing halted, however, the moment the text message from Arnold popped up on his phone.

Connor’s mother had passed away.

Kevin’s heart nearly stopped upon reading the message notification, forcing him to pull over to the side of the road to collect his bearings. His sandwich fell to the floor, but he didn’t care—not really,
not like he cared about Connor—so he just pressed his forehead into the steering wheel, eyes closed, and tried his hardest not to cry.

He and Connor had been doing okay, for the most part, over the past three months they’d been back home. Connor had kept the promise he’d made to Kevin about waiting and being patient with him, more so than Kevin had ever expected. He was grateful for that because he really did need the time to just think about all of this. He had to evaluate all of the possible outcomes and scenarios before leaping back into something that was guaranteed to flip his entire life upside down—and it was guaranteed to flip his entire life upside down; that much was certain.

But then there’d be these moments, mostly in the nighttime, when he’d be lying in bed, alone, sleep eluding him yet again, when an intense longing and sadness would come over him. He'd feel this inconsolable ache in his chest—an ache he used to will away, somehow—but now it was no use. He couldn’t even remember how he ever used to manage it. But, it was no matter because he didn’t want to will it away anymore. He wanted Connor, was what he wanted. He missed him terribly, ever since they’d come back home from Disney, intensely so, and he often found himself wondering why they weren’t just together already.

But then he’d step outside into the real world, into their tiny one-horse town where the people were still judgmental Mormons and then there was Charlie and he’d look at Charlie—really look at Charlie—and then he’d get scared again. Oh, and then there were his mother and father and siblings and then he’d go to therapy where they'd talk all about the Hell he’d been through over the past few years and then yes, he would remember exactly why he needed time to think about this.

He and Connor had developed a routine of not talking too often, out of respect for Kevin's space, but they would arrange to meet about once a month for coffee at a quaint little cafe in Provo. These check-ins had been Connor’s idea and they weren’t meant to pressure him at all; he just wanted to make sure Kevin was taking care of himself and going to his therapist and moving forward as best he could.

They would meet on Saturday mornings, usually, so that Kevin could just relax without the worry of needing to rush off to take care of Charlie or work or whatnot. Quiet and secluded in the back corner of the café, they'd lazily sip on coffees and nibble on stale biscotti, filling their conversation with gentle reassurances and laughter and memories. And if you’d of asked Kevin not more than three months prior if he thought he’d ever find himself sitting across from Connor, at a quaint little cafe in Provo, casually laughing over that time the redhead nearly pissed himself on Space Mountain or how his mother’s terrible cough made him cry sometimes or the fact that Kevin still couldn’t beat Connor at Scrabble, he would’ve called you crazy. But now, he thought, it wasn’t so crazy. No, now it was something he couldn't even believe he'd lived so long without. Usually their chats would last for about an hour, sometimes two—sometimes even three, if the mood was right. The mood was usually right.

There was just one problem, however: every time they’d meet over the course of the past three months, Kevin would psych himself up beforehand and get it in his head that he was ready to try, with Connor. He’d be so sure of it, too. Really, he would be so, so sure. He’d even make all of these grandiose plans where he’d imagine taking Connor's hand and giving it a kiss before saying something sweet and honest and from the heart; after of which, he’d present Connor with a bouquet of his favorite flower—purple tulips.

On his way to the café, he’d usually stop in at the Tulip Tree and Judith, the nice lady who owned the place, would make him the most beautiful arrangement of purple tulips and baby's breath. Kevin figured that having the flowers on hand, in his bag, might just give him the extra push he needed to finally make a move. The tulips always came gift-wrapped in fancy wrapping, equipped with lovely
curled ribbon and a big fat bow on the side. He’d hide them out of sight, tucked away in his large messenger bag. He didn’t typically carry a messenger bag with him, but he needed a place to conceal the tulips, just in case he chickened out.

The trouble was—he always chickened out.

Judith was kind enough to give Kevin the leftover tulip bulbs, in addition to the bouquets of flowers, citing that tulips were a perennial flower and that he should save the bulbs—they’d make a wonderful garden someday. Judith liked to talk a lot and was good at it, too, so much so that she’d somehow gotten Kevin to open up to her about his predicament with Connor, his parents and his sexuality. She was honestly starting to become like a second therapist to him.

It was all just so pathetic and sad, he thought, that dozens of tulips were being needlessly sacrificed for his impatience and fears, equally so, and then he’d just drive back home to Kaysville, alone and defeated, leaving a trail of wilting purple petals and far-reaching dreams in his wake.

But, at least he had his therapist. She just kept on assuring him, over and over again, that it was perfectly normal and okay and to take his time.

Fresh off the high of their Disney trip and feeling as though he could do anything he set his mind to, Kevin had made quick work of finding a therapist upon returning home. He’d researched the options thoroughly, often using work hours to scour the internet for prospects. He would call each and every one of them up on the phone too, just to make sure he liked the sound of their voice before putting them on his maybe list. He didn’t tell his parents about any of this, though. That part would have to come later, once he was stronger and wouldn’t crumble at even the slightest criticism. The only ones who knew about his therapist were Arnold, Naba, and Connor and he wanted to keep it that way—for now.

The therapist he’d finally chosen was a kind, homely-looking woman in her late-thirties with soft, reddish brown hair and hazel eyes. She had a disarming demeanor about her and always offered Kevin a water or a cup of coffee with a smile at the beginning of each session. He liked that about her. He liked that a lot and he liked her voice, too. It was soft and gentle, kind of like Connor’s and his sister’s, but possibly even more so. But the thing he liked most about her was that she seemed to genuinely care about him and his problems. He had no idea if the concern was genuine or not or if she was simply pretending to care just so he would keep paying her a hundred-and-fifty dollars per week, but it sure felt genuine, regardless, and he supposed that was all that truly mattered, in the end.

He was jolted from his reverie when his cell phone started to ring. He lifted his head up off the steering wheel and answered, but found he wasn't quite sure what to say.

“Kev?” The voice on the other end of the phone asked. “You there?”

“I got your message,” Kevin sniffled into the phone. He hated crying in front of anyone, even his closest friends, but it was always a little easier to do when it was just Arnold. “Do you know anything yet? When’s the funeral? How’s Connor? Is he okay?”

“Okay, slow down, bud,” Arnold laughed sadly, to which Kevin nodded into the phone. He took in a deep breath, to try and steady his tremors. “We don’t know anything yet, but he’ll let us know in the next couple days what’s going on.”

“How did you find out? Did he call you?” Kevin asked, a slight bitter taste lingering in his mouth. In truth, he felt a bit hurt that the news had come from Arnold and not Connor directly, but he wasn’t going to get petty over it. Not this time. Not when Connor was probably in terrible pain.
“Naw, I found out from Chris,” Arnold said. “Connor asked him to spread the news. I don’t think he feels up to talking to anyone just yet.”

Kevin nodded. No wonder he hadn't gotten a call, then. Chris wasn’t exactly overly friendly to him these days and he probably figured Arnold would pass on the news anyway.

“Did Chris say anything else?” Kevin asked—like maybe how Connor was doing, if he needed any help, if he was okay… “Anything?”

“No, not really,” Arnold said. “Just that his mom was admitted to the hospital a couple days ago and was gone this morning.”

Silence overtook the pair for a while as they both sat, miles apart, and softly sniffled into their phones.

“You should call him, you know,” Arnold eventually offered. “It would probably make him feel a lot better to hear from you.”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head with a sigh. Another sniffle. “We’re not… I mean, you know we’re not… we’re still not… not yet.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re the one person in the whole world he’d love to hear from right now, Kev,” came Arnold’s infinite wisdom. “Even if you’re still ‘not yet’.”

Arnold’s words were kind, but Kevin wasn’t sure how much truth they held. He and Connor had been meeting every once in a while for coffee, yes, but they were still far from how they used to be. He missed Connor—terribly. He loved Connor—terribly. He felt everything deeply, unyielding, and all-encompassing—terribly.

But he was home now. And home was still everything it always had been, always would be. It was where things felt familiar and lonely and all too real. It wasn’t some untouchable, far-off place like Orlando or Uganda. It was real life. It had been easy for him to entertain the idea of flipping his entire life upside down while he was off gallivanting around Disney World. Everything was easier there, in that place—in the place where everything was wonderful, where he was surrounded by supportive friends and happy laughter and Charlie’s ice cream-covered face and her lanyard full of Disney pins and Connor’s wretched screams whenever Kevin would force him to go on a rollercoaster. The memory made him smile, if only a little. That place was where he could do anything he set his mind to—anything at all, be anyone at all. He could take risks and dare to dream, there, in that place.

But here—well, here was another story entirely, with his mother and father just one town over and his boring, monotonous job and the Church and Charlie and Charlie’s friends and Charlie’s school and it was all just so… hard. Disney World was Uganda and Uganda was Disney World and Utah was, unfortunately, still Utah.

“Have you given any thought to maybe, I don’t know… telling him you might be ready?” Arnold asked, hesitation evident in his voice.

And Kevin knew exactly what Arnold meant by ready—ready to take a chance, ready to abandon all of his shackles, ready to live, for a change—to try, with Connor. But the answer still wasn’t yes and it still wasn’t no; it was somewhere in between—in a muddy, gray area, a limbo, a sad place; one where he could neither live nor die nor be reborn. It was a place where Kevin Price simply existed, but couldn’t really live. It was a place in which four dozen purple tulips had gone to wilt.
“I mean, it’s been over three months now, buddy,” Arnold continued, trying to sound encouraging. “And you’ve been doing so well in therapy… I just thought it might be time to start thinking about it, that’s all. Especially since—”

“I know,” Kevin sighed.

“I mean, who knows how much longer he’ll even be here, now that his mom—”

“—I know,” Kevin repeated, his tone agitated and tired, laced with a hint of self-loathing. He ran a nervous, shaky hand through his too-long hair, out of habit. He needed a cut. It felt slightly damp and stringy. “And I have been… I want to… I just—I just need a little more time, that’s all. I mean, I haven’t even talked to my parents about any of this yet, Arnold. They don’t know… anything yet. I need to figure out how I’m even going to tell them and then it’s going to be a huge deal and all of the problems I used to have are going to suddenly come flooding back and I’m just not sure I can—”

“Okay, okay, shhh,” Arnold soothed and Kevin knew that if they had been together, in the same car, his best friend would have pulled him into his chest and cradled him, because that’s just the kind of thing Arnold would do, no matter how many times Kevin snapped at him or yelled at him or cried on his shoulder. “It was just an idea, buddy. You don’t need to get all worked up over it.”

“Besides, wouldn’t that be a little crass?” Kevin sighed into the phone with a sniffle. “Sorry, Connor, I know your mom just died and all, but how about going out for a drink with me sometime?”

“No, Kev.” Arnold was quiet for a moment. “I actually think he'd love that.”

Now it was Kevin’s turn to go quiet.

“Let me know what the plan is when you find out, okay?” He eventually stammered, shakily setting his phone back into its holster. “I just…I just really need to get to work now, okay?”

“Okay,” his best friend relented, but Kevin could hear the hint of sadness in his voice. “I love you, bud.”

Kevin’s lips curled up into the smallest smile. “I love you, too.”

“And please just… think about what I said, okay?”

And then click—Arnold was gone, leaving only the dark, dreary sky with it's harsh gusty wind and incessant rainfall and and a long, long day of work ahead of him.

With a sigh, he started up the car and continued his drive. His sandwich had gone cold and he just didn’t have it in him to sing along to the music anymore.

Maybe he would call Connor. Maybe he’d invite him out for a drink or to a movie or on a date—a real one, this time. Maybe he’d bring him a bouquet of his favorite purple tulips, as a way of telling him he was ready to try again. Maybe even sometime soon.

But, not today.

Connor McKinley was a strong person. A Hell of a lot stronger than most people gave him credit for, anyway.
He’d gotten frequently picked on in school growing up, both for being a bit on the chubby side and also for his quote-on-quote “effeminate” ways. When he was eight years old, he sprayed a bit of his mother’s Chanel No. 5 onto his neck and went to school like that—proudly, too—thinking he would go through the entire day smelling just like the purple tulips in his mother’s garden. To Connor, that’s exactly what it smelt like. Little did he know, Chanel wasn’t the cheap stuff, so it really stuck to a person. During first period, a few boys got a whiff of it and, soon, word spread like wildfire that Connor smelled like a girl. That became the joke of the day—Connor smells like a girl. They teased him, pushed him, mocked him, slammed his face into his own locker—hard. And yet, still, when he went back home and his mother had asked him if he’d had a good day at school, Connor just forced a smile and said yes, Mom; because he didn’t want her to worry about him.

He was strong, if not a bit closed-off.

He’d only just turned the tender age of four the first time he’d ever asked his mother about why he didn’t have a daddy.

“Everyone at school has one,” Connor had said—referring to his pre-school cohorts, over a half-eaten bowl of Cheerios and milk. “Why don’t I have one?”

His mother’s face turned sad at the question, but she did her best to answer, nonetheless. She tried to explain to him, in the simplest way possible, that his father had to go back home to Heavenly Father’s kingdom; that he’d been called back too young, but that the Lord often worked in mysterious ways, ways that weren’t always apparent to us mere mortals here on Earth.

Connor didn’t understand any of it, really, as kids often didn’t. His mother went on to tell him that his father was still in here—she’d said the word as she touched the place on his chest above his heart—and that his father still loved them both very much, even if they couldn’t actually see him anymore. She told him that one day, hopefully in the very distant future, they’d all be reunited together in the afterlife—in Heaven.

His underdeveloped four-year-old brain had trouble understanding the whole thing because, as far as he was concerned, he didn’t have a father. He’d never seen him, anyway. And yet his mother would show him pictures and explain what it meant when someone got sick and passed away. He hadn’t really understood what all that meant, at the time. Not until he was about eight years old. But he was okay with that, with not understanding, because his mother had always been there to take care of him whenever he needed her, no matter what. And that was enough.

But when Connor turned eight years old, his Aunt Susie died. His Aunt Susie wasn’t Mormon—she was an old school Catholic, like most of his relatives. There were a couple of Jewish folks mixed in too, by marriage. He’d often overheard other members of his family making snide comments here and there about how his dad had forced his mother to join a cult, but his mother always just shook her head and told Connor not to listen to any of that nonsense, that they didn’t understand the true path that Heavenly Father had laid out for them.

Connor still loved his Aunt Susie very much—even if she was a sinner—and so did his mother. She’d come over for barbecues in the summertime and she’d always give Connor the best birthday presents out of all his aunts and uncles.

But then, one day, he’d heard that blasted phrase again—passed away. Aunt Susie had passed away and then suddenly she wasn’t around anymore. He just couldn’t understand it. She had just been there two weeks before when they’d visited her in the hospital after she’d gotten sick, but now she wasn’t there anymore. It was only when he’d attended Aunt Susie’s wake and saw her body laying there, lifeless and still, that he finally began to truly understand about his father. His father had been a real person, a real dad, in the real world—one who had loved and cherished him and his mother.
He'd just gotten sick and passed away, was all.

Connor McKinley had remained strong throughout the years, even when his own mother had gotten sick and passed away.

Now he was here, at his mother's wake, sitting in front of an opened casket that contained her lifeless body. He was trying his damnedest to both feel something, anything, all while trying his hardest not to break out crying; a strange contradiction.

It just seemed so wrong—all of it. Here he was, wearing a swanky Calvin Klein suit, a half-empty pint of vodka lodged securely inside his bag (the one he’d been sipping from every so often throughout the wake), pretending as though everything were perfectly normal and fine. Every once in a while, he’d feel compelled to make the rounds and say hello to those who had bothered to show up. He’d force smile after smile, shake hand after hand, embracing both strangers and relatives alike, all while pretending he wasn’t actually dying inside. It was honestly his greatest acting achievement to date.

His mother wasn’t here – not really, anyway. His father wasn’t here. His Aunt Susie wasn’t here. The woman who used to babysit him when he was a kid and his mom was at work wasn’t here. He felt very grown up, all of a sudden; as though he really, truly was all on his own now, with no parents to catch him if he were to fall. To make matter worse, his best friends also weren’t here as they were currently in Puerto Rico for their anniversary trip. His friends were making sure to call him as much as they possibly could while they were abroad, to check in on him and make sure he was doing alright, but it just wasn’t the same.

He glanced around, thinking about all of the people smiling and making polite conversation while his mother laid dead in the front of the room like some kind of twisted amusement park attraction. The urge to take a swift hit of the vodka surged through his veins and he decided that it was probably time for another trip to the ‘bathroom’.

On his way, he was forced to smile and give a few hellos to several of his cousins, the blonde ones he couldn’t remember the names of. His smile faded as quickly as it came, however, as he made a swift beeline for the restroom. He didn’t expect to accidentally barrel himself right into the bodies of Kevin Price and Arnold Cunningham as he did so, who looked as though they’d just arrived.

“Sorry, guys. I wasn’t looking where I was going,” Connor apologized as he stepped back from the two men.

“That’s okay,” Kevin said and reached out to pull him into a hug. Connor willingly accepted the embrace and, before he knew it, he was being rocked back and forth in Kevin's arms, like a child. Kevin’s cheek was warm and slightly wet from tears as it rested against the nape of his neck. Connor could feel the burn of fresh tears prickling at his own eyes as he felt Kevin pull him in closer. He refused to let any tears fall, however. He refused. He’d cry later on that night, with a bottle wine and maybe a pizza, but not now; not here, not in front of all these people. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t.

As he pulled back from the embrace, he met Kevin’s eyes—eyes that looked warm and worried and devastated and a million other things, too. He turned to Arnold and put on his best forced smile, the one he’d been perfecting over the course of this most devastating event.

“Thanks for coming, guys,” he said with a snuffle and gestured towards the room behind him. “You can take a seat right in there. The Bishop is about to make some kind of speech or something.”

Uttering a polite “excuse me” under his breath, Connor turned to walk past them; only Kevin caught his arm before he managed to get very far.
“Wait,” Kevin said, gently. “Where are you going?”

Connor knew his eyes must have looked guilty as sin, but he tried to pretend anyway, for just a moment, that he wasn’t the worst liar on the planet.

“I have to go to the, um—to the bathroom,” he lied; and not very well.

“I’ll go with you,” Kevin said to Connor before turning back to Arnold. “You go on without me. I’ll meet you in there, okay?”

Arnold nodded and made his way into the viewing room. Connor just sighed. He knew Kevin must have smelled the liquor on his breath as they hugged and was starting to get worried and all that; (and Kevin honestly had the nerve to accuse him of being a worrywart.)

He breezed past Kevin, wordlessly, making his way through the crowd until he got to the bathroom, where he made quick work of shoving himself into a stall. He didn’t even bother to check if Kevin was right behind him or not. He just plopped right down onto the toilet seat and took a swift hit of the scorching clear liquid, relishing in the feeling of the burn it left behind, running down his throat. It made him feel something other than sadness, at least.

“Connor?” Came the familiar voice—and all too soon, a knock on the door of his stall. “Connor? Are you in there?”

With a muttered curse, he shoved the bottle back into his bag and opened the door. Kevin was just standing there with that concerned look on his face again. Connor knew damn well that the other man didn’t have to pee – he was just following him around, clearly.

“Are you okay?” Kevin asked, moving a bit closer, but Connor just brushed past him to go wash his hands. “I should’ve called you on Friday,” he continued, apologetically, “when Arnold gave me the news, but I just… well, he told me you didn’t really want to talk to anyone, so I thought I’d leave you alone for a couple days, to process things and to grieve and everything. I just didn’t really know what to say—"

“You are not just anyone, Kevin Price,” Connor whipped around and snapped. The anger he heard in his own voice came as a shock to him. He hadn’t felt angry just one moment ago, but now—well, now, here it was, along with a fresh pang of tears pooling behind his eyes. “Anyone is Jimmy Mc—Mcwhateverthefuck, my mother’s second cousin once removed. You, on the other hand,” he stressed, as he shoved a finger hard against Kevin’s chest. “Are not just anyone.”

“I know,” Kevin whispered, shaking his head. “I know.” He moved closer. “I’m so sorry, Connor. I am so, so sorry. I should’ve just called you. I should’ve just… said something, done something. I should’ve—”, he sighed, looking full of sorrow and regret. “I’m just… I’m just really, really sorry.”

Connor nodded with a sniffle and ventured a little closer to Kevin, looking deep into his eyes. Those warm brown eyes looked worried and kind and Connor knew in an instant that he wouldn’t be staying angry at him for very long.

Connor reached up and let his palm slowly slide down the sleeve of Kevin’s dark blue blazer. The material was soft and the color, perfect for Kevin’s lightly tanned skin tone. It was the same jacket Kevin had worn on their rather tumultuous not-date three months prior and, once again, Kevin managed to look nothing short of amazing. And Connor knew that Kevin’s heart, much like his suit, was also amazing. Kevin hadn’t hurt him on purpose—not today nor any other day. He didn’t know a lot of things about life or love or anything, really, but he did know that much to be true.
“It’s okay,” Connor said, eventually; and he meant it, too. “I didn’t mean to snap at you like that. I’ve just been under a lot of stress these past few days. It’s really okay, Kevin.”

“But are you okay?” Kevin asked, again. His voice was concerned and gentle.

“Yeah.” Connor nodded, trying his best to look convincing. “I’m okay.”

But then he hiccupsed rather violently from the drink he’d just downed a moment ago, giving away his lie.

Kevin’s face fell. He reached up, pressing a palm to Connor’s cheek. “How much have you had to drink?”

“No that much,” Connor deflected the accusation, embarrassed. It was the truth, though—he hadn’t had all that much to drink. It just so happened that he also hadn’t eaten anything all day, either. He’d been too busy to eat, lately. He’d eat later on that night, alone at home, in his mother’s empty house.

As another hiccup escaped his mouth, he could see the look of growing concern on Kevin’s face.

“Oh, don’t judge me, Kevin.” He swatted the other man’s hand off his cheek with a sneer. “My mother just died, okay? Cut me a little slack.”

“I’m not judging you,” Kevin said, earnestly. “I’m just a little worried about you, that's all.”

“Well, don’t be,” he tried to state as calmly as he could manage. “I’m fine.”

Kevin shifted in place for a moment. “You don’t seem fine to me.”

“Well, I am… fine.”

They were quiet for a moment after that, neither one of them really wanting to argue or go back out there and listen to the Bishop go on and on about what a good Mormon Connor's mother had been. Being a good Mormon wasn’t what mattered to either of them, anymore. It wasn’t what made the light of his mother’s soul shine bright as the sun or what made her love so powerful and strong. No, that was something else entirely—something that had absolutely nothing to do with being a good Mormon.

“To be honest, I’d probably be doing the exact same thing if I were in your shoes right now,” Kevin said, softly. He reached out and wiggled his fingers in the air, beckoning Connor to take his hand. He did and soon he felt Kevin giving it a gentle, reassuring squeeze. “Now, what do you say we go back out there and try not to roll our eyes at the Bishop, huh?” Kevin's smile was warm and comforting and familiar. It made Connor ache a little.

He nodded with a sigh before reaching into his bag and pulling out the nearly-empty pint of vodka.

“Wanna kill this off first?” Connor offered, shaking the bottle towards Kevin. “It might make the Bishop's speech a little more enthralling, at any rate.”

Though he looked a bit reluctant at first, Kevin eventually nodded and took a swift hit of the drink. He immediately began to choke on it, however, as the vodka burned its way down his throat.

“Oh, gross, Connor,” he shuddered. His cheeks bloomed a bright red. “I don’t know how you drink this stuff straight like that. It’s awful.”

“Yeah, well.” Connor shrugged and tipped his head back, finishing off the rest before chucking the
bottle into the garbage. It stung going down, but he was used to that by now. “You just get used to it, I guess.”

A flicker of concern flashed across Kevin’s eyes. With a sad nod, he took Connor by the hand and led them out the door and into the waiting crowd.

Kevin knew it was probably a rather crass and somewhat morbid thing for him to do—to pick up another bouquet of purple tulips for Connor—this time, on his way to Mrs. McKinley’s wake, of all things; a wake for a woman whom Kevin truly, in every sense of the word, was mourning. But the fact remained that Connor didn’t have any reason to stay in Utah anymore, not now that his mother had passed away, and Kevin Price was running out of time.

The bouquet of flowers had started out perfectly lively and fresh when he’d bought them not more than two hours ago, wrapped up nice and pretty in the Tulip Tree’s signature wrapping. It should’ve protected the petals from getting damaged, but, unfortunately, Kevin had to hide them in his bag, where they kept on getting bumped around and squished. To add to that, he had the most awful habit of needing to keep his stupid, anxious hands occupied, so he kept on reaching in and messing with the tulips every so often, without even realizing it. He usually caught himself fiddling with them whenever he found himself sitting all alone, staring blankly out at the casket, contemplating his own mortality. It was impossible not to contemplate such things as he sat there literally staring death in the face.

After the Bishop’s speech, everyone took turns paying their respects and kneeling in front of Mrs. McKinley’s casket.

It was Kevin’s turn now and he felt as though he should say something to her, something meaningful and real, but he quickly found himself not having any idea what to say. He’d only been to one other wake in his entire life—his grandfather’s—and he was only about ten years old at the time. This was all so new and strange to him.

“Hello, Mrs. McKinley,” Kevin whispered, awkwardly clearing his throat. After a moment of silence, he realized he was at a total loss for words. She wasn’t really here and probably wouldn’t be able to hear what he was saying, anyway, so it shouldn’t have mattered to him as much as it did. But it did matter to him because, way deep down, he still did believe in something. He knew it wasn’t Mormonism, but he was still clinging to the hope, the belief, that perhaps the soul really did survive after death. Maybe she could hear him. Maybe she couldn’t. He would never know for sure, so he figured it couldn’t hurt to have a little faith.

As he thought over what he wanted to say, he absentmindedly reached out and laid a hand atop the woman’s wrist. He immediately yanked it back, in horror, upon feeling how cold and stiff it was. It chilled him to the bone, making his insides clench.

Was this really how we all ended up, he asked himself silently—like this? And if so, what did it even matter if he loved a boy instead of a girl? Or if he got disparaging looks from strangers from time to time? Or if his parents looked down on him or got angry with him? He didn’t want to end up dying, ending up like this, with a giant mountain of regret on his shoulders. He knew it would be an unbearable weight to carry with him to whatever afterlife awaited him, if any. The idea of spending eternity constantly wondering what if seemed a much scarier fate than dealing with his father’s anger or his mother’s pity or his siblings’ disappointment.
His eyes wandered to the various notes and cards taped to the top of the casket. He caught sight of a heart-shaped note, pink and covered in glitter. It had the word *Mom* written across the front, in Connor’s signature handwriting—small and neat with a heart for the “o”. An unexpected sob burst from Kevin’s throat at the sight, but he tried to recover quickly, looking down and closing his eyes. He took in a few deep breaths, slowly, in and out. Opening his eyes and blinking back tears, he reached back out and placed a hand over Mrs. McKinley’s wrist again. He flinched at how cold it felt, but didn’t yank it away.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered, choking back tears. He quickly wiped at his eyes. “I’m so sorry I hurt your son. I didn’t mean to. I really didn’t. Everything was just such a mess. You have no idea how much of a mess everything was. I had no choice.” He took in a shaky breath. “But I’m trying to make it right again. I really am.” He sniffled again and gave the cold wrist a squeeze. “I don’t know if you can hear me or not, but I, um, I really do love him, you know. I want you to know that. I really do love him and I promise I won’t screw it up this time. I promise.” He sniffled again before taking another pause and pulling his hand away. He reached down into his messenger bag and pulled out one of the tulips from the bouquet, one that hadn’t gotten too beaten up inside his bag. He shakily placed the lone tulip down by her feet, where several other flowers laid to rest. “Thank you, again. For everything.”

As he stood up to let the next person in line have their turn, he glanced around worriedly, hoping to God nobody had heard his rather heartfelt words. He sighed in relief, as it didn’t seem as though anyone was looking in his direction. Well, except for Arnold. His best friend gave him a sad, reassuring smile. Kevin tried to smile back, but a hot stream of tears made their way down his face, instead.

“You can’t drive like this,” Kevin said to Connor as they walked out of the funeral home. “I won’t let you.”

The redhead was leaning into his side, stumbling a bit, looking bleary-eyed and exhausted. Kevin had a distinct suspicion the redhead had snuck more alcohol into his system after their little talk in the bathroom. He couldn’t really blame him—not really, not considering the circumstances—but there was no way Kevin was letting Connor anywhere near his car, not like *this*.

“Kevin,” Connor sighed in annoyance and yanked away from Kevin’s grasp. “The house is literally right down the street. I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t care if it’s right next door,” he said and yanked him right back. It wasn’t hard to do, considering how limp and tired the other man felt. He heard Connor groan, but his resistance went slack and he allowed Kevin to lead him to his car. “You’re not driving. I’m bringing you home.” He paused and gave Connor a gentle squeeze. “It’ll be okay. You’ll walk back tomorrow and get your car.”

He heard Connor mumble a few disgruntled objections as he helped him into the passenger side seat, but the only one he could clearly make out was: *fuck off*.

Kevin just sighed sadly, knowing full well that Connor was simply inebriated and grieving and exhausted and probably hadn’t eaten a single thing all day. He wasn’t going to take any of this personally—not at a time like this, not while Connor was in an unimaginable amount of pain. He was hurting and Kevin knew this, so he said nothing in response to Connor’s bait.
They were quiet during the three-minute drive to the McKinley house. Connor was turned away from Kevin, hugging himself in a ball, leaning his forehead against the window. Kevin had the sinking suspicion that Connor was probably crying softly to himself, but just didn’t want him to see.

When they got to the house, he helped Connor inside, making sure Mrs. McKinley’s overly hyper Yorkshire Terrier didn’t run out of the house.

“Where do you sleep?” Kevin asked, as he honestly wasn’t sure. He knew where Connor’s childhood bedroom was, of course, as they’d spent many a night in there when they were younger.

Connor made a weird noise before sighing, slumping into Kevin’s side. “I’ve been sleeping on the couch.”

Kevin helped him to the couch and laid him down. A blanket and pillow were already there, laying haphazardly on the floor.

“You need to eat something,” Kevin said, softly, as he watched the other man nuzzle his face into the couch cushion and close his eyes. “And you need water. I’m gonna go see what you have in the kitchen, okay?”

“Do whatever you want,” Connor replied, numbly. He rolled over to face the back of the couch, curling up into a little ball and sniffing. “I don’t care.”

Kevin’s face fell at Connor’s words, but he just nodded and went into the kitchen. He found some leftover Chinese food of questionable expiration in the fridge—sesame chicken and rice. There wasn’t anything else edible in the house, from what Kevin could tell, so he just nuked two plates of leftover Chinese in the microwave.

He also grabbed two bottles of water, along with some Advil, and set down everything down on the eating tray that was opened in the living room.

“Here,” Kevin said as he placed a hand on Connor’s shoulder. “You need to eat something. I heated us up some leftover Chinese food.”

“That’s from four days ago, Kevin,” Connor mumbled, making a face. “It’s probably gross.”

Kevin’s heart sank at that. He was just trying to help.

“Sorry,” he said, quietly. “I can try to make you something else.”

Connor shook his head and rolled back over to face Kevin. They gazed into each other’s eyes for a long moment, until Kevin picked up a piece of chicken with Connor’s fork and held it out to him.

“Just try it,” he said, nudging the fork towards him. “If it’s gross, I’ll make you something else.”

“I’m sorry I told you to fuck off,” Connor whispered as he took in a sniffle. As he sat up, he wiped at his nose. It was runny and looked awfully red and sore. “I didn’t mean it.”

Kevin tilted his head, giving him a knowing smile. “I know that.” He gestured for him to take the fork with the chicken bite on the end. “Just try it, okay?”

With a slow, shaky hand, Connor grabbed the fork and took in the bite. Nodding with approval, he proceeded to grab the plate and gobble up the rest of the food as though he hadn’t eaten in days. And, Kevin thought, he probably hadn’t.
After dinner, Kevin cleared the plates away and made sure Connor drank some of his water and took the Advil. He fluffed up his pillow and turned out all the lights before attending to, not only their dirty Chinese food plates, but also the giant heaping pile of dishes that currently occupied the sink. It looked as though they’d been left unattended for over a week.

“Connor,” Kevin whispered, as he walked back out to the couch. “I have to go now. My mom is watching Charlie and I told her I’d pick her up over two hours ago.” He waited a moment for a reply. “Connor?”

When Connor didn’t answer, Kevin placed a hand on his shoulder and shook it, gently. The other man still didn’t budge, but when he heard a light snore escape his nose, he knew Connor must have fallen asleep. With a sad sigh, Kevin sat down by his legs, carefully, trying his best not to wake him. He reached out and let his hand rest atop the slight curve in Connor’s waist, where his soft, pale skin showed a little. He moved his hand back and forth against the skin, giving him a comforting, stolen caress.

He stayed like that for a little while, content in watching Connor sleep. His mind began to wander as he listened to the rhythm of his breathing, his chest heaving up and down with every breath, the occasional snore being the only sound to break the silence.

Kevin felt a lone tear roll down his cheek as he thought about how sad Connor had looked that evening and about how sick his mother had been and her untimely death and about how there was yet another crushed bouquet of tulips sitting in his bag. He thought about leaving them on the coffee table, in a vase full of water, for Connor to find in the morning, alongside a little handwritten note. He imagined writing how sorry he was for Connor’s loss and that if he ever needed anything, to let him know and he’d be right there, in a second. He thought about telling him everything he’d told his mother only a few hours before, about how much he really did love him and cared for him and how he just wanted to fix everything that had gotten messed up and broken.

He wanted to tell him about the tulips, the ones sitting in his bag, rotting, and about how he’d been buying Connor tulips just about every time they’d meet for coffee, that ever since they’d gotten back from Disney it’s pretty much all he could think about. He thought about telling Connor how sorry he was for failing him, sorry for all the times he’d failed him, and about how he’d do just about anything in his power not to fail him again.

He thought about telling him how he wanted to take him out on a date sometime, a proper one, after he’d had a chance to grieve for a while, of course. Maybe a date to the movies or out to dinner would be nice, maybe to one of their favorite restaurants, like they used to do. Better yet, they could go play mini golf or go paddle-boating out on the lake, before the weather turned cold. He thought about writing a lot of things to Connor, in the note, especially as he pressed a soft kiss to his forehead and draped the covers up over his shoulders, letting a hand secretly caress his back. He thought about all of it, about everything he’d ever wanted to tell him, many times over. And, finally, he thought about Charlie. About how good Connor was with Charlie and how, despite it all, Kevin knew he’d love Charlie because Charlie was a part of Kevin and Connor loved Kevin.

He ended up leaving, though, without doing any of those things, without leaving Connor the heartfelt note or the bouquet of tulips wilting inside his messenger bag.

It was downright pathetic, he thought, angrily, as he drove to collect Charlie at his parents’ house. He was pathetic and weak and sad and he didn’t even deserve Connor’s love—not if he wasn’t willing to face a little hardship, in exchange. Connor was willing to change his entire life around, for Kevin and for Charlie and, yet, Kevin wasn’t even willing to deal with a little yelling from his parents. It was pitiful, Kevin thought.
Once he got home, he placed the wilting tulips in a vase full of water, where they'd last another two or three days, at best. He went outside, to the back, where he added a dozen new tulip bulbs to his growing collection. At least he was saving the bulbs.

*They’d make a wonderful garden someday.*

Saturday night was movie night in the Price household and Kevin and Charlie were laying on the couch in their living room, *Moana* playing on the television, much as it always was these days. Ever since they’d returned home from Disney World, Charlie’s interest in watching the film seemed to somehow quadruple now that she had met the “*real*” Moana.

“Look, Daddy! Look!” She cried. “It’s my favorite part.” He could feel her little bottom bouncing up and down against his tummy as the character of Maui appeared on screen. “It’s Maui!”

Kevin was laying down on their small couch, his head resting on a pillow. Charlie was sitting upright, leaning back against his tummy, and beside them sat a half-eaten bowl of buttered popcorn. Kevin had his cell phone in one hand, with the other wrapped loosely around the little girl’s waist. He’d spent most of the movie sifting through various photos on Facebook. He’d originally opened the app with the intention of sending Connor a sweet little note, asking how he’s been doing since his mother’s wake two weeks ago and if he needed anything. But every time he clicked on Connor's profile, he kept on either chickening out or not knowing what to say. What could he possibly say to make any of this better? He felt helpless. So, he just fell down a black hole of scrolling through his pictures, instead, being an entirely horrible friend.

“Look, Daddy!” Charlie squealed, wiggling her little body around in excitement. “Maui’s gonna sing!”

As he looked up from his phone to see his daughter’s happy, smiling face, he couldn’t help but pull her in closer, making a giggle escape her mouth. He gave her a loving squeeze and placed a soft, little kiss to the back of her head.

“Are you gonna sing with Maui?” He asked as he pressed another kiss to her curly locks, already knowing full well what the answer would be. She always sang the songs – high-pitched, off-key and positively adorable.

“Duh, Daddy,” she said, happily plopping back down against Kevin’s stomach. “I always sing with Maui!”

“Right, that was a silly question.”

And, sure enough, he found himself grinning from ear to ear as she attempted to belt out the lyrics to *You’re Welcome*.

Once the song ended, he turned his attention back to the array of photos on his screen. He clicked on Connor’s Disney album. Most of the pictures were ridiculous group photos with all of the former Elders making stupid faces for the camera. Some were of Charlie with various Disney characters. But when Kevin came across one of the photos, posted on the morning they all went home, his heart did a somersault in his chest. It was one he hadn’t seen before. It said “photo cred: Arnold Cunningham” in the caption and Kevin hadn't been tagged, for whatever reason.
It was a rather attractive photo of Kevin, Connor and Charlie together at the Epcot Illuminations fireworks show on the last night of their trip. Charlie was balanced on the redhead’s hip, a big dopey smile on her face, ice cream smeared across her tee shirt, a Mickey Mouse balloon in one hand, a fistful of the redhead’s hair in the other. Connor was grinning the largest grin Kevin had ever seen as he held her tightly to his chest; he just looked so happy. Kevin’s eyes drifted to the version of himself in the photo – he looked happy, too—really, really happy. Connor was on the right, Kevin on the left, with Charlie wedged between them in the middle. If he hadn’t known any better, he would have guessed the three of them were a small, proper family. Unfortunately, for Kevin, he did know better. He felt the sting of tears burn behind his eyes as he gazed down at the photo. As he ran a thumb over the image of Connor's rosy cheeks, several tears made their way down his face. A sniffle and he wiped them away.

He closed out Facebook and opened up the Messages app. His finger hovered over Connor’s name until he finally worked up enough courage to finally send him a text.

Well, okay, he had about twenty failed attempts before he worked up enough courage to finally send him a text. He’d write something, then obsessively re-read it, only to delete it a few seconds later. Then would come the growl and he’d just repeat and repeat.

He finally just texted Connor the only real question on his mind, forcing himself to send it before he could have any second thoughts.

It read, simply: I haven’t heard from you in a while. Are you okay?

He was worried about Connor and also quite impatient, so he couldn’t help but check his messages every five seconds while he awaited a reply. He’d try to concentrate on the movie for a minute or two, but he’d always end up compulsively checking his phone, instead.

After a while of waiting, he finally felt his phone buzz. He heart began to race, however, when he saw the message from Connor.

No, the text said. I'm not okay.

Shit.

I’m on my way over, Kevin furiously typed in response and hit send without thinking twice. He saw some protests and I’m sorries and it's okays from Connor quickly pop up in his notifications, one after the other, but he paid them no mind. He immediately texted Arnold, asking if he and Naba wouldn’t mind watching Charlie for a few hours while he went and checked in on Connor. Arnold, of course, said they would be happy to watch Charlie and that he didn’t need to rush.

He needs you, came Arnold’s message. Take your time.

It was such a strange feeling, Kevin thought—the idea of Connor needing him again. Connor hadn’t needed him in a very long time. But, it seemed as though he needed him now and Kevin wasn’t going to fail him—not again, not this time, not after everything Connor had done for him over the past few months. So, he hurriedly threw on his jacket and scooped up Charlie (along with Cuddles, her favorite blanket, and Moana on DVD) and hopped into the car.

During the thirty-minute car ride to South Jordan, the suburb of Salt Lake City where Connor had
grown up, Kevin stopped in at the *Tulip Tree*.

He was greeted warmly by Judith upon entering the shop, but was soon disappointed to find out that they only had one single purple tulip left in stock. She offered to create him a bouquet comprised of multi-colored tulips, instead, insisting that it *would be quite beautiful*, but Kevin just shook his head and sadly clutched the one lone purple tulip in his hands. He insisted it get the full treatment of wrapping and curly ribbon and the big signature bow.

“You’ve cleaned us clear out of them, you know,” Judith said with a sad laugh, for she knew very well why Kevin had cleaned them out. “But we should be getting some more in a couple months, don’t you worry.”

But Kevin didn’t want to wait that long. He couldn't wait that long, really. For all he knew, Connor would be back in New York City in two months time. So, he just nodded and resigned himself to give the lone purple tulip to Connor that evening. He’d do it this time, once and for all. He just had to be brave.

Twenty minutes later and he was nervously ringing the doorbell to the McKinley household. He didn’t know why he was so nervous. It was only Connor, after all—the same Connor he’d been meeting with every once and a while for coffee, the same Connor he used to share his life with, the same Connor who loved him and who he loved right back. He supposed he’d just never been very good at dealing with stuff like this — emotions, illness, death, things like that, but Connor wasn’t okay. He wasn’t okay at all and he needed Kevin to be there for him. Connor needed him and, for once, he was determined not to fail him.

Kevin could hear some muttered cursing coming from behind the thick wooden door, along with the barking of Chowder, Mrs. McKinley’s Yorkshire Terrier, as he waited for Connor to let him in.

As he stood there, his eye caught sight of a small, white *For Sale* sign sticking out of the lawn, over near where Mrs. McKinley’s garden used to be. A breath hitched in his throat at the sight, but he quickly closed his eyes and tried to calm down. It would probably take months for Connor to sell the house. They still had time. He still had the tulip in his bag. He’d give it to Connor. He wouldn't fail, this time.

As the door opened and he took in the sight of Connor, he noticed how burnt red his eyes looked and how his cheeks were stained from tears. He looked so tired, so run down, standing there with tear-stained cheeks, donning an old, faded tee shirt and baggy sweatpants. *Sweatpants.* Kevin couldn’t even recall the last time (or *any* time, really) he’d seen Connor wearing *sweatpants*.

“I told you not to come,” Connor sighed, as though Kevin’s presence was putting him out. “Why don’t you ever listen to anything I say? I told you not to—”

But it was too late; Kevin was already pulling him into an embrace, cutting off whatever protests were about to flood out of Connor’s mouth. He rocked him back and forth, trailing a gentle hand up and down his back. After a minute, he could hear Connor start to sniffle into his shoulder and that was enough to make a few unwanted tears slip out of his own eyes. The sound of Connor crying had always broken his heart and this time was no exception.

“It’s okay,” he whispered into Connor’s ear. “It’ll be okay.”
Connor nodded into his shoulder with a sniffle and lifted his face out of the crevice. Wiping at his eyes, he tried to straighten himself out a bit before speaking.

“You don’t have to stay here, Kevin,” he said. “I’m fine, really. It’s Saturday night. You should go home and be with your daughter.”

The man in front of Kevin looked entirely disheveled, exhausted and beaten down, as though he hadn’t slept in days.

“You look exhausted,” Kevin noted, gently and with concern. Swallowing hard, he reached out a hand and trailed it over Connor’s shoulder. “Have you been sleeping at all?”

Connor didn’t answer. He just looked away with a shrug, still not letting Kevin in through the doorway.

“Please let me help you,” Kevin begged in an almost-whisper as he stepped closer. “I don’t know what I can do, but I can try. I can try to help, keep you company. Whatever you need, I’m here.”

Connor looked up and met his eyes, smile sad and soft. His blue eyes glimmered from unshed tears. “There’s nothing you can do, Kevin. She’s gone. She had cancer for a really long time and now she’s gone. I don’t need any help, Kevin. I saw all of this coming months ago.”

“Well, um, if I were in your shoes,” he said, slow and calm. “I know I would need some help.”

“Well, I don’t,” Connor resisted. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Kevin said and gave Connor’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “You’re clearly not fine. You told me yourself you’re not.”

The other man was quiet for a moment, looking embarrassed at the reminder.

“It’s okay,” Kevin whispered, taking a step closer to the other man. “I just hate seeing you like this. There has to be something I can do. I can’t just… sit at home and do nothing while you’re… in pain like this. I should’ve called you sooner.”

“Kevin—”

“No, I should’ve,” he said firmly, growing angry with himself. “I don’t know why I didn’t and I’m sorry.”

Connor gave Kevin very small smile and wrapped a handful of pale slender fingers around the tanned ones resting atop his shoulder.

“It’s okay,” Connor said, giving his hand squeeze for emphasis. “I’m okay. You didn’t have to come all the way over here for… this.” He gestured to himself with a sad laugh, alluding to the disheveled state he was currently in. “I mean, this isn’t exactly a pretty sight.”

“I don’t care what you look like, Connor,” Kevin said, shaking his head, disgusted at the notion that Connor’s appearance, especially at a time like this, would ever be a concern. “I care about you. You don’t need to get dressed or stop whatever you were doing. I just wanted to be here for you, that’s all.”

Connor closed his eyes with a sigh. “Kevin—”

“No,” he insisted. “You don’t have any brothers or sisters. All of your friends are in New York. You
must need someone to—I don’t know, to talk to or to help you with the house—or—or to cry on or something like that. I just—"

“Okay, okay,” Connor cut him off, gently, and held up a hand. “You can stay and… help, I guess.”

Kevin gave him a soft smile. “Good.”

They were quiet for a moment, until Connor cleared his throat. “So, I was just about to order a ton of food and stuff my face into oblivion. Whenever I’m depressed, I either eat my feelings or drink them. This seemed like an occasion for both.”

Despite it all, Kevin cracked a tiny smile at that. Leave it to Connor to make jokes at such a grave time as this one.

“And…” Connor continued with a sad sigh and looked away from Kevin’s eyes for a moment. “And I’ve just been sorting through all my mom’s old stuff. Trying to figure out what’s garbage or what I want to keep. I was going to do it alone and have a good cry, but you’re welcome to come on in and join the party, if you really want. But please don’t feel obligated, Kevin. I really am okay. I promise.”

Kevin felt his heart ache a little as he took in Connor’s words.

“You’re not okay,” he said, because it was the truth. “And I’d love to.”

“Okay.” Connor nodded, his eyes softening. He stepped out of the way and gestured for Kevin to make his way inside. “I hope you’re hungry.”

It should come as a shock to no one that Connor McKinley already had a bottle of red wine opened before Kevin had arrived, halfway to empty. The redhead heftily refilled his own glass before pouring one for Kevin. They ordered massive quantities of food for delivery: a shit ton of pasta, two cheesy garlic breads, and one large pepperoni pizza. They settled down to eat on the floor of Mrs. McKinley’s vacant bedroom, where Connor had been busy earlier, sorting through all her stuff and putting things away in boxes. Some would get thrown out, some would get sold; and some would be kept, probably forever.

A smattering of old photographs laid across the floor, in a gigantic, messy pile. It looked as though Connor was trying to sort through them all and put them away in albums.

Kevin leaned back against the foot of Connor’s mother’s bed, a glass of wine in one hand and a pepperoni slice in the other, stretching his legs out in front of him. Connor was doing the same, across from Kevin, leaning against the door of the closet.

“I thought you still didn’t drink,” Connor said as he ripped into a slice of pizza. Kevin knew his presence must have already cheered the other man up a little; his signature smirk was already back on his face, ready and eager to give Kevin a jab here and there. But Kevin didn’t mind. He was just happy to see Connor feeling a little better.

“I don’t really,” Kevin said with a shrug as he gazed down at the wine in his glass, swirling it around. “But I’m here to keep you company, right? And as they say… when in Rome.” He raised his glass, giving Connor a cheers.
Connor grinned and gave him a cheers back. “When in Rome.”

They continued to scarf down their food for about twenty minutes, as though they hadn’t eaten in years, until Connor looked as though he just remembered something very important.

“Oh, look what I found the other day,” he said to Kevin, through a mouthful of pizza. He leaned over to snatch up an old photo from the pile and tossed onto Kevin’s lap. He set down his pizza so he could take a look.

It was a large photo of him and Connor at only twenty years of age, dancing together at Sister Kimbay’s wedding. The edges of the photo were slightly frayed and tattered and it was in black and white, as were most of their photographs from Uganda. They’d had printer in the hut for the District Leader to use for printing out reports to the Mission President and such, but they never had any color cartridges, which meant that nearly all of their photos from that time were in black and white. Kevin had always liked that about them. This particular one had been laminated, but the edges had still managed to get damaged.

“Wow,” Kevin said, wistfully, as he took a good, long look at the photograph. “We look so happy here.”

“I know,” Connor hummed, sounding very far away. He paused for a moment. “I think you should keep it.”

“Why?” Kevin asked, looking back up to meet Connor’s eyes.

The other man just shrugged. He played around with the pizza on his plate for a moment before looking back up at Kevin. “I just think you need it more than I do, that’s all.”

Kevin didn’t quite know what to say to that. What could he say? He thought about the tulip sitting in his bag. It was probably getting more and more crumpled the longer it sat there. Was now the right time to give it to him? Would it ever be the right time?

“I put the house up for sale,” Connor said, quietly, after a brief pause. He wiped at his chin, where a bit of tomato sauce had gotten stuck. “You probably saw the sign outside.”

“Yeah,” Kevin admitted, head hung low as he stared at the photo in his lap. “I was going to ask you about that.” He kept his gaze focused on the picture as he spoke, of Kevin and Connor back in Uganda, back when they weren’t so fucking miserable. “Does that mean—I mean, are you moving back, then?” He swallowed hard. “To New York?”

He had no idea why he was even bothering to ask that question—after all, he already knew the answer.

“Yeah, I am,” Connor said, his tone one of finality. “As soon as the house sells.”

Kevin froze for a moment, eyes still trained on the picture in his lap. He squeezed his wine glass so tight, he was sure it would break at any moment, shattering and spilling all over the photo. But it didn’t.

“But, um, but I mean that could take months, you know? We still have—I mean, you have—we still have lots of time,” Connor stammered, trying to make it all seem just a little better, a little less tragic, a little less final. “I just can’t stand being here anymore, you know?” He continued on, taking in a snuffle. “This house was always my mother’s house… me and my mom… and now it’s just… it’s just big and empty and dirty and it makes me depressed.”
“You could always fix it up,” Kevin offered, his voice full of optimism and hope. He scooted closer to where Connor sat. “I could help you. I bet we could—”

Connor cut him off by shaking his head. He then tipped it back, letting a long sip of the velvety red liquid slide down his throat.

“I have no life here, Kevin,” he explained, numbly, as he swallowed. With a sad chuckle, he let the back of his head hit the door; forlorn and tired. “New York is where my career is and my apartment is and my life is. This isn’t my life,” he said, gesturing to the messy room with it’s half-cocked pictures of potted plants and Jesus lining the walls; the slightly-torn, slightly-dirty tan carpeting, full of holes and mystery stains. Old photos of the McKinley family adorned the shelves and walls, along with Connor’s college degree from NYU and various awards and other little pieces of nostalgia. The house looked sad and worn down and lived in. His mother’s now-unused oxygen tank and bags and clothing sat atop a wheelchair in the corner of the room, in a giant pile; suddenly all too useless. Kevin could understand why he didn’t want to—couldn’t bear to—stay here anymore.

"I mean, unless… unless I still have a reason to stay,” Connor added, softly, giving Kevin’s foot a little nudge. Kevin’s blood ran cold. It was the question they’d been avoiding for three months now, the one Kevin was hoping to answer with the tulips, but kept chickening out. “Do I still have a reason to stay?"

Connor kept his gaze on Kevin, silently urging him to say something—anything—to tell him that yes, he still had every reason to stay—that Kevin still wanted him to stay; that he needed to stay.

But the question was too hard for Kevin to answer, so he didn’t end up saying anything. He might have given Connor a little nod, as thoughts about the decaying tulip in his bag crossed his mind. He might have, but he probably didn’t.

An hour passed after Connor’s question went unanswered; another bottle of wine, opened.

They were on their second bottle now, to be precise. Kevin was starting to have the sinking suspicion he wouldn’t be making it home that evening, not after four glasses of wine and it was only—he glanced down at his watch—nine o’clock. He wasn't going to worry about it though. He was here for Connor—to help him and to listen to him and to offer a shoulder to cry on, should he need one.

“I haven’t been seeing anyone, you know,” Connor divulged during a lull in the conversation, cheeks rosy from all the wine. He was laying in a rather odd position with his head on the floor, legs hoisted up over the bed, for what reason Kevin had no idea. “I mean, I still go to gay bars and stuff because—well, let’s face it, there isn’t anything else to do around here,” he continued, referring to the greater Salt Lake City area. “But I, um… but I haven’t been seeing anyone.”

“Hold on a second,” Kevin said, practically choking on his wine. "You’re telling me that there are gay bars here—,” he paused for emphasis. “In Salt Lake City?”

“Yes, Kevin,” Connor sighed, not without an eye roll. “Wherever there are gay people, there are gay bars. Which means there are gay bars everywhere, even the Mormon heartland.” He sat up for a moment, taking a sip of his wine. “And I’ve been to all of them, many times over.” As he rested his head back against the carpet, he squinted his eyes, as though mulling something over. “Hmmm, but
“The Sun Trapp is definitely my favorite.”

“Why’s that your favorite?” Kevin asked as he took a sip from his own glass. “Do they have the hottest guys or something?” He suddenly felt rather defensive, not really liking the idea of Connor being fawned over by the hottest gay men in all of Salt Lake City. But, thankfully, the other man found his remark quite amusing.

“God, no,” Connor snorted, making a face. “It’s a total dive bar.”

“Then why’s it your favorite, huh?” He pressed, again.

“Taco Tuesday,” Connor said, happily. “One dollar tacos every Tuesday.”

“Tacos?” Kevin asked, perking up at that. His limbs felt awfully heavy as he reached over to grab a slice of pizza from the mostly-empty box. “Did you just say tacos?”

"Tacos."

“Tacos,” Kevin drunkenly repeated as he laid back down on the floor. “Mmmm. You know, I really like tacos.”

For some reason, that made Connor smile. Not his usual smug smile, either, but rather a very special smile—one that Connor had crafted years before, especially for Kevin.

“Well, then I’ll have to take you there sometime.” Connor said, beaming. “For tacos. Oh, and margaritas. Definitely margaritas.”

Kevin hummed approvingly, mouth once again stuffed full of pizza. “Tacos.”

“Tacos.” Connor repeated.

“So, do you go a lot, then?” Kevin asked, after swallowing the bite. He felt a little bit awkward asking the question, mostly because he wasn’t quite sure if those kinds of questions were stepping outside some kind of invisible boundary they had in place. He and Connor weren’t back together—not yet, anyway—but that never did seem to stop Kevin from feeling just a teensy bit...jealous. “To—to the gay bar, I mean. Do you go a lot?”

“Depends on what you mean by ‘a lot’.” Connor shrugged. “I was going two or three times a week before our Disney trip. My mom was really sick and I just needed to get out of the house.”

“Yeah, well.” Kevin thought about it as he took a sip of his own drink. He burned a little going down. “That makes sense, I guess.”

Connor chuckled to himself as he flung his legs off of the bed and sat up straight. He reached over and grabbed the last slice of pizza out of the box. “I thought dressing up sexy and having guys pick me up would help me feel better about myself,” Connor said, rather openly. Kevin was surprised at exactly how open, though he suspected that was mostly the wine’s doing. The tone of Connor’s voice still troubled him a little; it sounded self-deprecating and bitter.

“Did it?” Kevin asked. “Make you feel better, I mean.”

He wasn’t trying to be mean or condescending; he was genuinely curious. This life Connor led—one of gay bars and dance clubs and flirting and men and pick-ups and one-night stands—it was all so foreign and strange to Kevin. Kevin knew he was far behind the curve when it came to sex. He’d never even really had sex before, not in the traditional sense; save for that one time with Marjorie, the
night he couldn’t even remember he was so black out drunk, the night that altered the entire course of his life, forever. Other than the few inexperienced hand-jobs he’d received from Connor, back when they were together, he was completely inexperienced.

“No,” Connor answered Kevin’s question, direct and simple, as he swallowed a rather large bite of pizza. “It didn’t.”

“Do you still—,” Kevin hesitated a moment, awkwardly clearing his throat. He gazed back down at his wine. “I mean, do you still let—do you still let guys ‘pick you up’?”

“Why, Kevin Price.” Connor smirked as he leaned in closer, that smug look returning to his face with full force. “Are you asking me if I’ve been sleeping with anyone?”

“I—,” Kevin’s mouth opened a little in confusion, but promptly shut it; “I—I don’t know. That depends on what you mean by a ‘pick-up’. I’ve never actually had one, you know.”

That made Connor snort. “Of course you haven’t.”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “Just answer the question.”

“I let guys flirt with me and dance with me,” Connor said, coyly. He paused for a moment, just to give Kevin’s foot a little kick. “But, I haven’t slept with anyone since—I mean, not since, you know.” He looked down at his glass, shyly. He idly swirled the red liquid around the glass. “Not since Disney.”

“But guys must hit on you, right?” Kevin asked, sounding a little bit overprotective. “I mean, if the bar we went to in Orlando was any indication.”

Kevin had tried with all of his might to forget that night—forget their horrible, nasty fight, forget the way he’d divulged too much without even touching any alcohol, forget the way all of those men looked at Connor, ogling him and eyeing him and dancing with him and touching him. Kevin knew he had no right to be jealous—not yet, anyway—but he couldn’t help it. Connor deserved more than that, he deserved so much more than just a tawdry, meaningless one-night-stand or cheap date or someone who’s only interested in getting into his pants. He deserved so, so much more than that.

“But of course they do,” Connor said, amusement in his voice, as he downed the last bit of wine in his glass. “I happen to be a very good catch, Kevin Price. Or have you forgotten?” That made the brunette roll his eyes. “But it doesn’t mean anything.” He gave his empty wine glass a shake. “Do we open another bottle or what?”

Kevin bit his lip. He honestly wasn’t sure. He didn’t really think they needed another bottle, but Connor didn’t seem too worse for the wear just yet and the conversation was flowing easily. Kevin was honestly having… fun. It felt almost like old times.

“Alright, maybe one more,” he said, warily. “But then that has to be it. I already can’t drive home as it is.”

“Don’t worry,” Connor said, the corner of his lip tugged up. “You can have my old room tonight.”

Kevin snorted. “Does it still have that same awful mattress we used to sleep on, like, a million years ago?”

“Six years ago, and, yes, the same,” Connor said as he stood up off the floor with a long stretchy yawn. “Come with me to the kitchen?” He asked sleepily, holding out a hand to Kevin, to which he promptly latched onto and pulled himself up.
“Need a big, strong man to uncork it for you, huh?” Kevin teased, making a silly face and rolling up his sleeves, as if to show off his muscles. These days, he only ever got this… playful with Connor after he’d gotten a good amount of alcohol in his system.

“Please.” Connor rolled his eyes. “I hope you’re not talking about yourself.” His face broke out into a grin as he leaned back into the bedroom door, gesturing for Kevin to walk on through. “Because if I recall correctly, you used to always ask me to open the pickle jar. And the sauce jar. Come to think of it, even the ketchup jar.”

Kevin held up a finger, in protest. He backed out into the doorway, only to tipsily crash into the wall behind him. “That—that is so not true.”

“Oh, that is definitely true.”

“Nuh-uh,” Kevin said, sticking his tongue out. He could hear now that his own voice was slightly slurred, but he didn’t really care all that much. He leaned forward, closer to Connor; pressing him up against the door. “I’ll have you know that I have opened many a jar for… for Charlie.” He nodded confidently as he pulled back, as though that was supposed to be impressive. “Unlike you, she appreciates me and my… brutish man strength.” With a big, dopey grin, he proceeded to flex an arm, just to prove his point.

And that made Connor laugh.

They spent the next hour or so drinking more wine and getting more tipsy, despite Kevin’s protests that they really didn’t need any more wine.

They moved to the living room, at least, where they sat sprawled out on the love-seat. It was the only area of the room not occupied by boxes; the only reason being that Connor had been using the couch as a bed for the past several months.

The excess of red wine and pizza was making them talk a little more freely and laugh a little louder. Kevin relished in the sound of Connor’s laugh—his high-pitched, sweet, and out of control laugh. And the way his cheeks bloomed pink whenever he did, from both Kevin and the wine, making his heart flip flop and dance and do all sorts of wacky things. He was drunk, he could admit it.

Out of drunken curiosity, they’d occasionally crack open one of the random boxes laying around the room and look through Connor’s old toys and his mother’s photos and family memories. At some point, Connor came across an ancient-looking photo of his mother and father, back when they were still young and healthy and very much in love.

“You look just like her, you know,” Kevin said with droopy, slightly drunken smile. He was pointing at the picture of his mother in a pink bikini, standing in front of the ocean. She was grinning so wide, as big as the sun. She couldn’t have been much older than Connor. The summer sun reflected off her reddish auburn hair and her skin, pale and freckled and dotted with sunburn. She glowed when she smiled, too—just like Connor, and when Kevin said the words you look just like her, he saw Connor glow again, if only for a moment.

The more they drank, the more they talked—Connor drinking and talking a bit more than Kevin, as was often the case. They eventually got on the subject of deeper matters, as was also often the case after several bottles of wine had been consumed.
“If you hate your job so much, why don’t you just *leave*?” Connor asked, slurring his words and making a *face*. “I go through at least four or five jobs a year. It’s not that big a deal.”

“It’s different for you, dummy,” Kevin laughed and gave Connor’s leg a kick. “You’re doing the *theatre thing.*”

“The *theatre thing.*” Connor mocked in a high-pitched voice.

Kevin rolled his eyes as he took in another sip. “No, but my job’s different. I work in a boring office answering boring emails from boring people all day.”

Connor shuddered, looking aghast. “That sounds so *boring.*”

“It is!” Kevin insisted. He’d been getting a little sillier and more emphatic the longer the night progressed. “The most exciting thing to *ever* happen at my job was when Mary got caught stealing Robert’s lunch,” he exclaimed, leaning in closer to Connor, nearly tipping his wine over.

“She stole his *lunch*?” Connor looked horrified.

“Yes!”

“What a *bitch.*”

“That’s what I said!” Kevin shouted, a bit louder than necessary, wine splashing over the side of his glass. “There was a public shaming in the kitchen and *everything*. It was pretty wild.”

Connor giggled at the stupid story before crawling a little closer to Kevin.

“You could do anything you want, you know,” he said, reaching up and pushing back the flop of Kevin’s hair that was dangling over his eyes. Connor was a little drunk and he always got a bit touchy feely whenever he was drunk, especially with Kevin. “You’re smart and capable and you learn things quickly. There must be something else out there you could do with your life, besides answering boring emails from boring people all day and watching people get publically *lunchshamed.*”

Kevin’s face scrunched up. “Is that even a real word?”

“It is now.” Connor beamed. “I just invented it.”

“It’s not that easy,” Kevin laughed, his smile soft. He reached down and placed his glass on the carpet.

He just hoped it wouldn’t fall over again. They’d drunkenly had to clean up at least three spills already and Kevin, though he kind of stopped caring after the second, didn’t particularly want to get up again. He was comfy and warm right *here*—laying on the couch, talking and laughing, with Connor.

“I don’t have my college degree, so it’s a little harder for me to find jobs that pay well enough, you know?” Kevin explained, leaning back into the couch with a sigh. “I mean, enough to support me and Charlie.” He laid there for a moment, humming quietly to himself. “Charlie means everything to me, you know.”

“I know,” Connor chuckled. “You’ve only told me about *sixteen thousand* times,” He was just teasing Kevin, much as he always did, but his face soon softened. Kevin could see a glint of sadness shimmering across his eyes. “So, wait, you didn’t finish school?” He asked, to which Kevin just
shook his head. “You never told me that.”

The brunette just shrugged and flopped his arm over the side of couch. He picked up his glass again, bringing it to his lips. “Yeah, well, I don’t exactly like to advertise it. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“You could go to night classes, you know,” Connor offered, patting Kevin’s knee. A warm, hopeful smile bloomed on his face. Kevin absolutely loved that smile. He loved it more than just about anything in the whole world. Charlie—Charlie was the only thing in the world he loved more than that smile. “They have them over at SLCC. Mondays and Wednesday nights. They even have online classes too, so you can do them in your own time.”

Kevin’s eyes went soft at the suggestion. He reached up and pulled Connor down, closer to him, on top of him, so close that their noses were practically touching.

“How is it you always know so much about everything?” Kevin asked, admiration in his voice. “It’s like a thing with you.”

The question made Connor laugh and blush at exactly the same time—a look that always made all the blood in Kevin’s body instantly rush to his groin; and this time was no exception.

“No, really,” Kevin insisted, trying to make a serious face, but he was much too drunk for that. “I’m serious. What is it with you?”

“I drink,” Connor replied, lifting up his glass and gesturing a cheers towards Kevin. “And I know things.”

He eyed Kevin, as though waiting for a reaction of some kind. When he didn’t get one, he rolled his eyes.

“Game of Thrones, Kevin,” Connor said, as though it should have been obvious. “Don’t tell me you don’t even have time to watch TV?”

“Oh, I tried watching that show with Arnold,” Kevin said, his voice slurred and nose wrinkled. “I didn’t like it very much. Too much nudity and… incest.” He shook his head and scrunched up his face, to illustrate the point.

Connor just laughed, his eyes gleaming with a fondness for Kevin. He kept his eyes locked on Kevin’s for a moment, looking oddly content.

“You’re such a gigantic dork, Kevin Price,” he eventually said; his voice quiet and soft. Pretty soon, he moved over, so he was cradled into Kevin’s side instead of on top of him. He reached up and let his fingers gently glide over the fringe of Kevin’s hair, brushing a thumb across his forehead. “I love you.”

The three little words, despite having been said many times in the past, had caught Kevin completely off guard. He wasn’t sure how to respond. He did love him. He did. But was he ready? Would he ever be?

Even in his drunken state, the expected reply had trouble rolling off his tongue. Still, he went to reply, anyway, to say I love you, too, but found he couldn’t. He just couldn’t. And he hated that he couldn’t. He thought about how easy it had been for him to say those words to Connor a mere three months back; when they were in Disney World, laying together in a hammock, crying and yelling and confessing it all, baring their souls, their everything, to one another.

But, it was harder now. It was harder now because now, they were back in Utah; where the stakes
were very high and very, very real. And even a drunk Kevin Price was still a scared, broken, cautious Kevin Price.

With a hard swallow, he just reached down and took one of Connor’s hands into his own. He brought it up to his lips, giving the top a chaste little kiss.

He just hoped it would convey the same meaning as I love you, too, but it probably wouldn't.

Another two hours passed and the mood, as it often did when too much alcohol was involved, eventually took a turn for the worse.

Happy laughter eventually deteriorated into drunken sobs and tears and too many truths being told and too many ancient feelings being brought to the surface.

Kevin was, ironically, the more sober one of the pair (ironic because he’d never been very good at holding his liquor).

He was starting to regret ever opening that last bottle of wine. They didn’t need it. He knew they didn’t need it, but Connor was very, very persuasive, especially when his eyes were all blue and twinkling and beautiful like they were that night and Kevin just couldn’t resist saying okay, but this has to be the last one. That last one turned out to be one too many and he was beginning to regret it.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Connor blubbered through a new burst of tears, his voice wavering and desperate. His hands were balled into fists, clasping at Kevin’s shirt.

“I know,” Kevin said in a soothing voice, trying to calm him down. He ran a gentle thumb over one of Connor’s hands that was still gripping his shirt. “But I told you already... I’m still... I’m still thinking, Connor. You told me—you promised me—that I could have time to think, remember? You promised me.”

“I know I did,” Connor whispered, his face bright crimson and covered in tears. “But it’s been three months now, Kevin,” he reminded him with a sniffle (not that Kevin needed any reminding - he knew exactly how long it’s been, down to the day.) “And I know you’ve been through a lot of terrible things, Kevin. I know... oh God, I know... and I’m not trying to pressure you or anything. I’m really not. It’s just—.“ He blinked back more tears, but some still escaped and rolled down his cheeks. “I’m just so tired, Kevin. I’m so, so tired. I’m tired of sleeping alone every night, tired of loving you and missing you and never getting to hold you or talk to you or wake up next to you or see how you're doing or hold Charlie or see Charlie or... I’m just so tired. I'm tired of all the one-night stands, tired of letting random guys fuck me just so I can spend half an hour feeling just a little bit good about myself, like someone actually loves me, for a change, and I'm just so tired.”

“How many one-night stands were there?” Kevin blurted out, stupid and drunk. He instantly regretted asking the question the moment it left his mouth. It was the wine who was talking now, not Kevin. Kevin was in there, somewhere, probably jumping up and down in the background, whispering questions for the wine to ask.

“I don’t know,” Connor drunkenly mumbled as he lifted himself off of Kevin, letting go of his shirt. He slumped over a little, falling down onto the couch. “Thirty or forty?”
“Thirty or… or forty?” Kevin cried out. His heart rate instantly quickened at the mental image of that many men. “Did you just say thirty or forty?”

Connor took in a tearful gasp at the harsh sound of Kevin's words, slamming his eyes shut. Tears were rolling out of them now, streaming down his cheeks in droves. His body began to shudder, breaths hitching one after the other in his throat.

Kevin’s heart sank at the sight. He reached out and scooped Connor up into his arms, cradling him. He whispered soft words into his ear to try and make him relax a little, to stop crying, to stop hyperventilating. But, it didn’t work and Connor just let out an uncontrollable sob into Kevin’s chest, tears and boogers mixing together to soak into Kevin’s shirt.

“Shhh, shhh,” Kevin soothed, rocking him back and forth in his arms. “Shhh. It's okay. It's okay. I’m so sorry, Connor. That wasn’t a very nice thing to say. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, but you’re right,” Connor gasped as he pulled back, looking into Kevin’s eyes. “You’re absolutely right. I let strangers fuck me in order to feel better about myself. I’m nothing but a whore. That is what you meant to say, isn’t it? You meant to call me a whore.”

As Kevin’s face fell, a thousand shots of adrenaline bolted through him. This wasn’t how this night was supposed to go. He was here to make Connor feel better, not worse.

“No, no, that—that isn’t what I meant,” Kevin insisted, bringing Connor back into him, hugging him close. “You’re not a whore, Connor. You’re… you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You’re the love of my life. I would never think anything less of you, no matter how many…,” he paused, not quite sure how to say this politely. “No matter how many guys there were.”

“It makes me feel like I’m worth something, you know?” Connor sniffled as he pulled up to face Kevin. He blinked back fresh tears. “When guys flirt with me or—or want to sleep with me, it makes me feel like… like somebody actually wants me, for a change. That’s what a whore does, Kevin.”

“Connor,” Kevin whispered, gripping the man in his arms, holding him as tight as he possibly could. “Connor, listen to me, okay? You have to stop saying these things about yourself. Because they’re not true. They’re not true and you’re breaking my heart.”

“I’m nothing but a whore, Kevin Price,” he screamed in his face, beating into Kevin's chest with his fists. “Your sweet little Connor McKinley turned out to be nothing but a dirty whore. How does that make you feel?”

“Connor,” Kevin gasped, clutching the man in his arms tightly to his chest. “You are not a whore. You are so many… wonderful, amazing things, but you are not a whore. You’re not any of these terrible things you’re saying about yourself right now. You’re smart and loving and funny and kind and so—“

“No!” Connor yelled, another painful sob soon following. “I’m nothing but a cheap whore who goes to clubs and lets random guys fuck him. Then I just lay there like a zombie with my goddamn eyes closed, pretending I’m with—,” he stopped short, quickly losing his words to another sob.

“Pretending I’m with someone who loves me.”

“Please stop saying these things,” Kevin begged. “Please, please stop. It’s breaking my heart. It’s just… it’s breaking my heart. You have to stop.”

“I just want someone to love me,” Connor whispered as he pressed his face back into Kevin’s chest, tremors and sniffles wracking his body. “I just want someone to love me. That’s all I want. That’s all
I've ever wanted.”

“I love you, Connor,” Kevin whispered, allowing a hand to travel up and down his back, in a soothing motion. “I love you so much. I love you so, so much. Please stop saying these things. Please stop. It’s hurting me. It’s really, really hurting me.”

“You love me,” Connor choked out a tearful laugh; sad and bitter. “Just not enough to actually be with me, right?”

“That isn’t true, Connor. You have no idea how not true that is. You’re just drunk,” Kevin reasoned, trying to sound soothing. “You’re just drunk and you won’t even remember saying any of this in the morning. You just had too much to drink, that’s all.”

“You know, the first time I ever had sex,” Connor laughed sadly into Kevin’s shirt. “Was in a goddamn men’s room at a gay bar in the East Village.”

The words coming out of Connor’s mouth stabbed Kevin straight through the heart, wounding him. The image of some stranger using Connor’s body for a cheap thrill against the wall of a bathroom stall plagued his mind, filling him with an overwhelming amount of rage and regret.

“It hurt so much,” Connor cried. “But I let him do it, anyway. I begged him to do it. I didn’t even know his name. I never even asked.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Kevin whispered into his ear, letting a hand reach up and card through his strawberry hair. “I’m so sorry, Connor. I’m so, so sorry. You didn’t deserve that. You don’t deserve that. You deserve… so much more than that.”

“My first time was supposed to be with you,” Connor whispered, soft and numb. “It was supposed to be sweet and romantic and it was supposed to be with you.”

Kevin felt his lips quiver as he rubbed his face into Connor’s neck. “You’re hurting me,” he whispered into Connor’s ear. “You’re really, really hurting me. You have to stop.”

“I’m sorry,” Connor sniffled and buried his head deep into Kevin's chest. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s just… my mommy’s gone and I’m all alone now and I’m just so scared,” Connor cried into his chest. “I’m all alone now. I’m all alone.”

“You are not alone,” Kevin whispered. He held him close; shaky, trembling hands trying their best to make the man in his arms feel loved and safe. “As long as I’m alive, you’ll never, ever be alone.”

Connor eventually fell asleep on top of Kevin, drunk, at about three o’clock in the morning. He was snoring loudly, wrapped up in Kevin’s arms.

It was difficult, but Kevin managed to lift him up enough, so that he could roll out from underneath him. With trembling hands, he covered him up with the blankets, tucking him in and kissing him goodnight, just as he had done two weeks before.

It took him nearly two hours to do what he needed to do; after of which, he crawled back into the couch, next to Connor and wrapped an arm around his waist. He held him close, as though he feared someone might snatch him away at any moment. He buried his face into the back of Connor’s sweaty neck, the tiny hairs tickling at his nose.
“You do still have a reason to stay here, Connor McKinley,” Kevin whispered into his ear. “I promise you that.”

Connor woke up the next morning, earlier than he would have liked. It was nine o’clock and the sun was blazing through the blinds, bouncing off his eyelids, making them ache and, oh gosh did he have one wicked headache. His stomach wasn’t faring too well either. He’d told himself years before at twenty-three years old that he needed to stop overdoing it, but it seemed as though he still hadn’t learned his lesson.

Making some sort of ungodly noise, he forced himself to sit up on the couch. He could taste last night’s pizza and wine and garlic bread in his mouth, a most unpleasant feeling, and his whole body was moist from sweat. As he sat up, he felt his belly rumble, doing violent flip-flops.

“Ugh,” he sighed and flopped right back down onto the couch. He didn't know where Kevin was, couldn't even get his brain to function enough to hypothesize. He couldn't really think at all, about anything. Everything hurt. He barely remembered anything that happened the night before after one in the morning, the rest was all just a giant blur. He had the sinking feeling he'd probably end up apologizing, though, for something. He remembered enough to know that.

He turned over onto his side, facing the fireplace and coffee table. Through the fuzzy blur that plagued his vision, he caught sight of something rather odd. On the coffee table sat one lone purple tulip sitting in a Wicked souvenir cup that was filled halfway with water. The flower looked a little worse for the wear. The edges were crusted with brown and several of it's petals had fallen off, laying atop the table, dead and dried out. Next to the tulip sat a little note, written on a folded piece of composition paper—probably from one of his mother’s old notebooks they had laying around.

Feeling absolutely awful, but more than a little bit curious, he forced himself to sit up enough to grab the note.

Upon unfolding it, he read it silently, to himself. It said:

Dear Connor,

I'm not sure why I'm even writing this when I'm probably going to see you in a few minutes anyway, but I guess I wanted it written down on paper, just in case I chickened out. Also, I hope you feel okay. We both drank too much last night. You scared me a little, but I suppose maybe that turned out to be good thing - I probably wouldn't be writing this letter if you hadn't.

I have so many things I want to tell you, Connor. I have so many things to tell you that I don’t even know where to start.

I guess I'll start with a confession. I've been buying you purple tulips for about three months now, ever since we came back from Disney, and I just haven’t had the strength to give them to you. I buy them every time we meet for coffee, but then I don’t give them to you. I know that probably sounds stupid, but it’s true. And this is the last one they had. I’m sorry it’s kind of brown and wilted and squished. I hope the thought still counts for something. I haven’t forgotten anything about you, you know. I remember your favorite flower (purple tulips) and your favorite wine (pinot noir) and what your shoe size is (10 1/2) and the fact that you dressed up as Ariel for Halloween one year when you
were like 8 years old. I haven’t forgotten anything about you, even when I pretended I did.

The problem is that, even though I love you, I don’t think I’m ever going to feel “ready” enough to do this thing, to try this again, to be... gay, to be openly gay, to tell my parents, because it terrifies me. I know that sounds silly, but it’s true – I’m absolutely terrified. I’ve never been more terrified of anything in my entire life.

But, you know what? I’m going to try anyway. I want to try, anyway, with you. It’s only ever been you.

I want to take you out on a date, soon – a real, proper date that’s actually called a date. I want to take you out on lots of dates and bring you to the movies and let you eat all my popcorn and I want to go out on double dates with Arnold and Naba and I want to wear our rings again and I want to get to know you, all over again, Connor McKinley. And I want Charlie to get to know you too. She misses you, you know. She tells me all the time. And I want to have the most amazing life with you, Connor, if you’ll let me - if you’ll forgive me. I want to do everything we used to say we’d do, years ago, but never did because a lot of things happened and I got scared.

Life is too short and too long not to spend it with the person you love. I lay awake at night thinking about you, about us. I think about how I’d give up just about anything to have you laying beside me again, to have you in my life and in Charlie’s. I think about how it might feel to finally be honest with my parents and my brother and my sister. And you know what? I really like that picture. I like it a lot. It’s the only picture I want my future to look like.

I have a lot to say, but I think I should say it in person (I’m in the kitchen making us breakfast).

I love you, Connor McKinley, and I can’t wait to do this crazy, scary thing with you all over again. We just need to take it slow, that’s all. Very slow, if that’s okay, because I have a lot of things left to work out and I’m just not ready to tell my parents yet. I will tell them, soon, I promise, but I want to just...learn how to do this whole thing again, first. I hope that’s okay with you?

You still have every reason to stay here, Connor McKinley, because I haven’t given up on us yet and I hope you haven’t either.

Love,
Kevin

Somewhere far away, Connor could smell the faint scents of bacon and eggs sizzling in the kitchen, where Kevin was cooking. He could hear the other man humming softly to himself as he made breakfast, some old hymn Connor couldn’t remember the name of. It all mixed together with the sounds of car after car whizzing past the house, outside the window, coming together to form a strange, calming melody. Clutching the note tightly to his chest, he bent over and cried; but for the first time in a very, very long time, they weren’t tears of sorrow.
Kevin Price was hunched over the stove; hot and exhausted, wearing Mrs. McKinley’s faded flower-print apron. He’d just flipped an omelet, somewhat unsuccessfully. He was usually better at this, but he wasn’t exactly feeling one-hundred percent this morning. The wine and tears from the night before had left him with a pounding headache, bleary eyes, and frazzled nerves.

He went ahead and flipped the other omelet. Whichever one fared the best, he was planning to give to Connor. A little bit of cheese was oozing out of the omelet’s fold and the eggs had gotten slightly torn during their descent, but all in all, it didn’t look half-bad. It looked like an omelet, at least, and Kevin had certainly cooked many a meal in his life that looked far worse than this—far, far worse.

As he went to reach for the pepper shaker, to give the omelets a little extra flavor, he felt two warm hands circling his middle, hugging him close. Forgetting about the condiment entirely, he quickly turned around to face Connor. He looked sort of happy, in a tearful, overwhelmed kind of a way, but also as though he had one wicked hangover. His red hair was tousled; his eyes, red and puffy. His shirt was blotched with stains from multiple culprits: sweat, pizza and spilt wine. And, yet, Kevin’s heart still skipped a beat the moment he felt those gentle hands wrap around him, cupping at the bones of his hips.

“Did you get my note?” Kevin asked, mouth and throat going impossibly dry. He knew the answer already, of course, based on the arms around his waist and the almost non-existent, but still very
much there, twinkle in Connor’s eyes. A wave of embarrassment and discomfort hit him and he could feel the rush of blood rising to his cheeks. He’d poured his heart and soul out in the note to Connor—a note that was probably messy and stupid and barely even coherent, scribbled on a scrappy piece of composition paper at five o’clock in the morning. But it was something, at least. It was something. It was a step in the right direction and zero steps back and that must have counted for something.

“I did,” Connor said, his smile soft and appreciative. “Thank you for the tulip, Kevin. It’s beautiful.”

“It’s not beautiful. It’s dead.” Kevin chuckled, sadly. “And dried out.”

“It’s still beautiful,” he insisted, and Kevin could tell he meant every word of it. Connor blinked a few times in the quiet space between words and Kevin could see how watery and glazed over his eyes were getting. “I’m so sorry, Kevin,” he whispered, voice broken and cracked. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“What?” Kevin stammered, caught off guard by the sudden apology. He had been too busy focusing on those beautiful blue eyes, sparkling with contentment and tears, and those soft, soft hands and where they currently sat, atop his hips. It was enough to make him lose his breath, regardless of the sick, pitiful states they both were in. “What for?”

Connor’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “For last night.”

“Oh.” Kevin reached up to his hips and cupped his hands over Connor’s, running his fingers gently over them. “But why are you sorry? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Connor let out a sad, half-chuckle at that, despite the intense hangover Kevin knew had to be plaguing his body. It had to be, after all that wine and all of those tears.

“For getting drunk. For crying. For hurting you,” he explained, giving Kevin’s hips a squeeze. He looked down to the floor, taking in a soft snuffle. “For pushing you too hard, like I always do. I don’t know why I always do this.” He leaned his forehead into Kevin’s chest. “I always push you so hard… and even after everything you’ve told me, after everything you’ve been through… I still pushed you too hard. I just can’t believe I did that. I’m so sorry, Kevin.”

“No, no, listen to me,” Kevin whispered, trying to get Connor to look up and meet his eyes. When the other man didn’t budge, Kevin did it for him, gently lifting his chin with a fingertip. “You don’t need to be sorry,” he assured. “You didn’t do anything wrong. If anyone should be sorry, it should be me. I’m the one who’s been stringing you along for months now, never letting you know how I was feeling or what I wanted to do. You had to push me, Connor. I needed it. I really did. It was the only way to get me to—to make a choice, to take a chance, to do something.” He swallowed hard, looking down and running his hands up and down Connor’s lower arms, trying to make him feel better. “It was a good thing you did. This is a good thing. You and me… are a good thing. I mean, we will be a good thing. I won’t let you down again. I promise.”

“But you said you weren’t ready,” Connor whispered, voice hoarse from lack of hydration and tears. “You’re still not—,” a breath hitched in his throat and, soon, he crumbled into Kevin’s arms. “You’re still not ready. You told me yourself, in the note. You told me you might never be ready.”

When Connor lost his next few words to a muffled sob, Kevin’s hands found themselves tangled up in messy locks of hair, soft reassurances pouring from his lips and into Connor’s ear. Forgetting all about the piping hot omelets sizzling behind him, he allowed a hand to gently caress the other man’s scalp, while the other worked it’s way up and down his back.
“I might not be ready,” Kevin whispered, softly. “I might never be ready. But I’m ready enough to try, at least, and I sure as Hell want to try with you.” He let out a sigh, pulling Connor closer to his chest. “If you’ll still have me, that is. If you still want me after everything I put you through.”

And that made Connor laugh right into Kevin’s chest, as though he’d just heard something incredibly funny.

“Of course I’ll still have you,” Connor cried out, pulling back and play-punching him in the arm. Through subsiding laughter, he sighed; eyes glassy and all-knowing. “You really are an idiot sometimes, Kevin Price. I really do hope you know that.”

But before he could answer, to say something like of course I know that, you’ve only told me about a thousand times, Kevin heard a loud, crackling pop behind him, making him jump nearly two feet away from the stove. He let Connor go, pushing him out of harm's way. He frantically turned off the burners and tended to his omelets—omelets which were now nothing more than smoky pieces of char.

“Dammit,” he cursed as he quickly shut off the flames. “We’ll talk later, alright?” He assured Connor through a cough, waving the fumes away from his face. “After I finish making breakfast. Why don’t you go take a nice, long shower, drink some water, and I’ll have new omelets ready for us in no time, okay?”

“Okay,” Connor said, softly, a distant, far away smile on his face. He kept his gaze on Kevin for a little while longer, watching as he cleared away the burnt breakfast. “Since when did you learn how to make omelets, anyway? The Kevin Price I used to know couldn’t cook a damn thing without setting the house on fire.” As Kevin dumped the burnt breakfast into the garbage, he shot Connor a knowing look. The redhead rolled his eyes. “Present incident excluded, of course.”

Once Kevin was certain that nothing else could possibly catch fire, he turned back to Connor, smirk on his face.

“Since I had a child,” he explained, figuring the answer should have been obvious. “When she was two years old, the doctor told me I couldn’t keep feeding her nothing but jars of baby food and Chef Boyardee every day. Something about it not being healthy.”

Connor raised a curious eyebrow. “No offense, but I agree with the doctor.”

“Yeah, well,” Kevin sighed, feeling nostalgic at the memory. “I had to learn how to cook some real food—to keep her alive and all.”

“So, this older, more mature Kevin Price is not only an amazing dad, but also an amazing cook,” Connor mused, a hint of admiration in his voice. He stepped closer and ran a hand over Kevin’s chest, where Mrs. McKinley’s faded flower-print apron was protecting his shirt from splashes of oil. “A lot’s changed over the past six years, hasn’t it?”

“Well, yeah... sure, it has.” Kevin swallowed rather hard, not entirely sure where Connor was going with this. He linked their hands together, giving Connor's a reassuring squeeze. “But we’ll have plenty of time to get to know each other all over again. And we will. I promise.”

“Yeah.” Connor nodded, lips curling up into a tiny smile. “We will.”

“Besides,” Kevin looked down with a sigh, only to peek his eyes back up a moment later; “the truth is, I can only cook about five things really well. I call them my... Kevin specials.”

He knew his cheeks were burning bright red by now, from embarrassment—they had to be—but the
look on Connor’s face was soft and amused, so it was well worth the momentary discomfort.

“Oh, yeah?” Connor grinned, leaning in and bumping his nose against Kevin’s. “And what five things might those be?”

“Omelets, spaghetti and meatballs, baked chicken, pork chops, and grilled cheese. Everything else still comes from the can or the frozen foods aisle at Trader Joe’s or—,” he sighed, again; “or my mother.”

The confession made Connor snort, followed by breaking into a fit of giggles. It sounded like sweet music to Kevin’s ears—the sweetest, in fact, second only to Charlie’s, lighting up the dark place inside his heart.

“But,” Kevin said, holding up a finger. “I can assure you that I cook them all very, very well.” He gave Connor a wink. “You’ll be impressed.”

“Well, we’ll see about that,” Connor teased. “Now that I know omelets are one of your Kevin specials, I expect nothing less than perfection this time around.”

“That’s okay,” Kevin said, his voice going soft and thick. He leaned in closer to Connor—so close that their lips were practically touching. “I’m up for the challenge.”

He wasn’t sure if they were still talking about omelets, or something else entirely, but they remained quiet for a few moments longer, until Connor eventually whispered: “I should probably leave you to your omelets then.”

But Connor didn’t seem to want to move and neither did Kevin. It felt awfully nice, holding each other like this—foreheads pressed together; warm, sweaty hands intertwined; eyes locked; two pieces of a very broken puzzle falling effortlessly into place. He felt wholly content like this, as though he had somehow made it back home again, in a way he never could with his parents. He let his eyes linger on Connor’s, getting lost in the blue, acutely unaware of the passage of time. And despite the stench of burnt omelets filling up the room, reminding him of his failure, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so at peace.

“Kevin?” Connor broke the silence first with a whisper, untangling their hands so he could circle them around Kevin’s neck, instead. He pulled Kevin closer, rubbing their noses together in an Eskimo kiss.

“Yeah?” Kevin replied, followed by an awfully hard swallow. He felt suddenly self-conscious, vulnerable even, at the realization of just how close they were getting now. The weird, warm, and strangely intoxicating feeling was certainly familiar to him, but it was one he hadn’t felt in far too long a time.

Leaning deeper into the embrace and closing his eyes, Connor whispered a soft and earnest thank you into Kevin’s mouth, the warm air from his words brushing against his lips.

The urge to close his eyes and pull Connor McKinley into a passionate kiss, right there in that moment, was nearly impossible to resist. The feeling was so strong and powerful and all-encompassing that the thought of not taking Connor’s mouth into his own—swallowing it whole, devouring it—seemed downright preposterous. The very idea made his stomach ache. But Kevin simply didn’t want their first kiss—their first kiss in almost six years—to be like this: here, in Connor’s mother’s tired, old kitchen, surrounded by garbage and burnt breakfast; not to mention the pain, both of their cheeks stained from tears, bodies sick from overindulgence.
No, he wanted this monumental moment, this long-awaited kiss, to be absolutely perfect—a moment so memorable and magical and important that it would wildly surpass all of the others that came before.

*That* was what he wanted.

As his eyes lingered on Connor’s for just a few moments longer, his mind began to wander. He imagined taking Connor out on a date—a real, proper date—one equipped with all of the laughter and love and nervous energy and cheesy romanticisms they used to share back then, back when everything was wonderful. He wanted to shower him with all of the physical things he hoped would embody all of the intangible things, the feelings, that lived inside his heart, the ones he’d never been all that good at expressing. He wanted to bring him flowers and candy and take him out for dinner and dancing—the works—because Connor deserved all of that. All of it—he deserved all of it.

And then, only when the moment felt just right, would their lips meet together in a long, slow, unhurried kiss; the kind that lingered on your lips for hours after it happened; the kind that felt infinite, that made your nerves catch fire and your heart explode. The kind that made you feel as though you were falling and floating, yet somehow also melting into one another, butter into toast; the kind that left you feeling hazy and flushed and confused and glowing and off-kilter and yet somehow still yearning for more—the kind of kiss they used to share a long, long time ago.

In Kevin’s mind, that was exactly how their first kiss in almost six years should be—needed to be—absolutely and unequivocally perfect.

“I want to take you on a date,” Kevin whispered into Connor’s mouth, after a time. As he swallowed rather hard, he realized just how dry his throat had gotten. Their lips were so close now, practically touching. “A real one, this time.”

A few tears spilled out of Connor’s eyes at the words, rolling down his burnt cheeks. He sniffled, squeezing Kevin’s neck a bit tighter. “I’d like that.”

“How about next week?” Kevin asked, moving to cup Connor’s cheek in his hand, wiping away some of the fallen tears. “Next Saturday? But, um, only if it’s not too soon after… well, after you know… your mom and everything. I understand if you need more time.”

More tears escaped from Connor’s eyes with every word that fell out of Kevin’s mouth. The sparkles that danced over them made his answer perfectly clear—he didn’t need any more time.

“Next Saturday sounds perfect.” A breath hitched in his throat, but Kevin knew it wasn’t from sadness. Not this time. No, dare he say Connor actually looked happy, for once. Kevin was finally making him happy—so happy that he was bubbling over with tears. “I’d like that a lot.”

“Good.” Kevin beamed, wiping away a few tears with his thumb. “Then it’s a date.”

“It’s a date.” A tearful grin broke out on Connor’s face. “A *date* date.”

“A *date* date,” Kevin laughed, warmth crawling up his spine as he pulled the other man closer.

Closing his eyes, Connor pressed their cheeks together, a rather content laugh bursting from his throat. “A *date date*.”

Kevin gave the top of Connor’s head a little kiss before reluctantly pulling back. “But, first—*omelets.*”
He knew he didn’t have to, but Kevin Price chose to go out and buy a brand new outfit to wear on what was about to be his very first date with Connor McKinley in almost six years. These days, he almost never went shopping unless it was to buy the annual obligatory winter coat or new school clothes for Charlie. Very rarely did he go out of his way to buy clothes for himself, unless necessity demanded it, but this seemed like too special of an occasion not to look his very best.

He was standing in front of his bedroom mirror, smoothing back a patch of misbehaving hair. Squirting some gel onto his palm (he’d finally bought a bottle for himself), he ran his fingers through the freshly-cut locks. He needed to make sure they would stay in place all night long, no matter what the evening might have in store for them. Once satisfied with his hair situation, he took a step back so he could get a good, long look at himself.

He was surprised to find that, for once, he didn’t absolutely despise the person gazing back at him. A small part of him even liked who he saw: a man in his late twenties, tall, tanned, and reasonably attractive, with a winning smile, to boot. His eyes were dark and warm, shining with a twinge of confidence and determination; a stark contrast to the sad melancholy he usually found there.

The slim-fitting dark blue jeans he’d bought specifically for this occasion fit him quite nicely—almost sexy, even—especially where the material hugged at the muscles of his thighs. He knew Connor would probably make some kind of comment about them, perhaps accompanied by a flirty whistle or a giggle or suggestive wink. The thought made the corner of his mouth tug up into a small smile.

The cranberry tee he was wearing felt soft-to-the-touch, showing off the definition of his chest, and draped over this shoulders hung a cozy, cream-colored sweater, part-way opened in the front. The sweater was a nice touch, he thought with an approving nod, as he turned to check out the other side of his body. Yes, a very nice touch, indeed; especially for the crisp October weather that was now upon them.

He looked good. Casual, yes, but still quite spiffy. It was exactly the kind of look he used to have, years before, back when he actually gave a damn about things like looking attractive. It was a look he honestly didn’t think he’d ever see on himself again.

Confidently squaring his shoulders and giving himself a final once-over, he grabbed his cell phone and snapped a quick selfie at the best angle he could manage. He then sent it to Arnold and Naba, to get their opinions.

This entire thing had him feeling nervous and excited and scared. All day long, his nerves had been buzzing, anxious and jittery. This date with Connor was so important to him, for a multitude of reasons, and he wanted it to be absolutely perfect. It was the start of something new, as well as the reclamation of something old. It was his chance to show Connor everything he’d been too afraid to say thus far using words.

Arnold, of course, was the first to reply back: an enthusiastic string of exclamation points and omgs and drool emojis, making Kevin shake his head and grin from ear to ear at the same time. Soon came Naba’s more mature response of: you look amazing, Kevin - have fun tonight, followed by yet another string of drooling smiley face emojis, from Arnold.

His friends’ encouraging replies helped to calm him down a little, but he still felt like a jumbled ball of nerves. As excited as he was to start this whole thing over with Connor, there was still this small, persistent voice nagging at him, reminding him over and over again how not ready he was for all of
this; how he might never be ready. The fear of breaking the restrictions he’d so carefully set for himself, the ones that were designed to keep himself and Charlie and their life together safe and simple and free of negativity, was always there, in the back of his mind. The idea of going outside of his comfort zone, of putting himself on display like this and in public, no less, terrified him. He would try not to let it show in front of Connor, but the fear that lived inside of him was still there and still very, very real.

Keeping his gaze trained on his reflection, he stood up just a little bit taller and told himself, for about the hundredth time that evening, that he was making the right decision; that he needed to face his fears head on and never look back; that he needed to be strong for Connor and for Charlie and for himself; that it would all be worth it, in the end. He wanted to be happy. He wanted love. He wanted a family. What he didn’t want was to live out the rest of his life, shoulders crushed by a mountain of regret, constantly asking himself what if and if only and why didn’t I just—

On his way out of the room, he grabbed an extra sweater from the closet for Connor. Kevin knew his date very well, so he knew just how terrible he was at dressing for the weather. And Kevin didn’t want to take any chances tonight, especially considering his favorite activity of them all was to be done outdoors (kind of). He didn’t want to hear any moans and groans about the chilly nip in the air from Connor, not on their very first night spent together as more than friends in almost six years.

When the doorbell rang at precisely six o’clock, Kevin eagerly bounded down the staircase, Connor’s sweater in one hand and a box of chocolates in the other. He didn’t exactly realize it, but he did so with a bit of an extra spring in his step.

_Ding dong._

Connor was standing in front of Kevin’s home, on the top of the steps, anxiously awaiting the door to open. He was nervously running a hand through his hair, a habit he’d suffered from since as long as he could remember.

Taking in a deep breath, he told himself to just calm down. It was only Kevin, after all. Sweet, kind, amazing Kevin—Kevin, who owned not two, not three, but four pairs of Mickey ears. There was nothing to be nervous about. It was only Kevin. Besides, it wasn’t as though this would be their first time going out together. No, it was more like the five hundredth time. He had absolutely nothing to worry about.

_Deep breaths._

He still couldn’t believe the day was finally here—the day he’d been looking forward to ever since they returned home from Disney World, the day he honestly thought might never come. He was going out on a date with Kevin Price—a real, honest to God date. If Connor hadn’t possessed such spectacular control over his emotions, he probably would have found himself squealing or jumping up and down or losing his lunch right about now. Well, it was a very good thing he did have control over his emotions then, wasn’t it?

The door swung open a moment later, revealing Kevin Price—looking absolutely gorgeous. So gorgeous, a breath caught in his throat.

Then again, Connor had expected nothing less from his date, who would have looked just as
gorgeous wearing a garbage bag or a rucksack or nothing at all, really. But while he most certainly did look gorgeous when wearing nothing at all, the cozy Fall look he had going for him this evening was still enough to take Connor’s breath away. And take it away, it did—not to mention those jeans.

As Kevin stepped closer, he could feel his chest tighten up almost instantly, in anticipation, and his stomach was flip flopping all over the place, sick with butterflies. He wasn’t quite sure if the cause was Kevin’s soft, cream-colored sweater or his warm, kind eyes or those jeans or the fact that he was clutching a bouquet of tulips and a box of chocolates in his arms, presumably for Connor.

“Don’t tell me I’ve actually rendered you speechless?” Kevin teased as he stepped closer. “Because I find that hard to believe.”

Connor felt his cheeks burn at the rather flirty remark. It would seem as though the tables had, indeed, turned. Normally, it would have been Connor doing the teasing, trying to make Kevin’s cheeks turn all sorts of red (because he really did look adorable whenever that happened), not the other way around. Kevin had somehow managed to one-up him this time—and Connor McKinley wasn’t about to stand for that.

“No,” Connor lied, rolling his eyes. “You just look really… amazing tonight, that’s all. Really, really amazing.”

“Yes, well,” Kevin’s eyes softened as he reached out, gently plucking at one of the buttons on Connor’s shirt. “So do you.”

Connor prayed to whatever God was listening that his face wouldn’t give a true indication of how Kevin’s words were making him feel, which was as though his insides might come bursting out of his body any second now and splatter all over Kevin’s cozy-looking sweater. He knew his eyes would surely give away his feelings, anyhow, no matter how hard he tried resist. He was good at hiding his emotions, usually, but not so much tonight and certainly not from Kevin—Kevin, who had always been been able to tell exactly how he was feeling just by looking into his eyes. And look into them, he did.

Connor tried to put on his usual confident smile as he pointed to the items in Kevin’s arms. “For me?”

“Oh, yeah,” Kevin said, as though he'd completely forgotten about the gifts. His cheeks flushed rosy as he handed the bouquet of tulips to Connor. “They were all out of purple… mainly because of me, but I, um, well I know you like pink too, so—“

“They’re beautiful, thank you.” Connor beamed as he dipped his head, allowing the tip of his nose to gently rest against the petals. Closing his eyes, he took in a deep breath, letting the sweet, floral aroma fill his senses. “But you really didn’t need to get me anything, Kevin. This is too much.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t want to cheap out on our first date or anything,” he reasoned as he handed Connor the box of Godiva chocolate truffles. Connor must have given him a funny look, because Kevin immediately turned red and tried to restate himself. “Er, um, that—that isn’t what I meant. I meant to say that you deserve all of this stuff… this romantic stuff. I didn’t mean to imply that I was going to cheap out later or anything.”

Oh, how positively adorable Kevin Price could be, Connor thought—so very sweet and kind and adorably awkward. So much time had passed between then and now that he’d nearly forgotten how adorable—and how awkward, a trait of which Connor had always secretly loved about Kevin. It was just one of the many traits of Kevin’s that he loved.
Kevin continued. “Wow, um, that didn’t come out right at all,” he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Sorry. It’s been a really long time since I’ve done this.”

“Relax, Kevin,” Connor laughed, reaching up to bring the other man’s hand down from his face. He gave it a reassuring squeeze. “You’re doing better than you think.”

Kevin sighed in relief, the confident little twinkle returning to his eyes.

“So, um, we should probably get going then,” Kevin said after a moment, clearing his throat. He gently took the tulips from Connor’s arms. “I have a lot planned for tonight and it’s already after six. Let me run inside real quick so I can put these in some water and say goodbye to Charlie. Then we’ll go, okay?”

“Hey now,” Connor chided, yanking Kevin back as he went to run up the steps. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“I don’t think so.” He made a face. “Like what?”

“Like inviting me in to see your home?” Connor grinned, taking Kevin’s hand and leading him back towards the door. “I’ve never actually seen it, you know.”

“Oh, um... you—you haven’t?”

“No,” Connor reminded him, feeling rather confused. “In case you’ve forgotten, we haven’t exactly been on speaking terms these past few years.”

“Right,” Kevin stammered, looking suddenly uncomfortable. “Well, I don’t know. I mean, tonight’s not a very good night for that. I have all these activities planned and I don’t want to waste any more time on—”

“Just a quick five-minute tour, I promise,” Connor said. “Besides, I have something for Charlie.”

“You do?” Kevin’s eyes went soft as he eyed the bag slung over Connor’s shoulder. “What is it?”

Connor reached in and pulled out the stuffed monkey he’d lovingly nicknamed *Bananas*. He had a habit of giving everything a name, from his toaster oven to his favorite pillow, and since he’d bought the monkey over two months ago now, he was no exception. “Just a little ‘happy first day of Kindergarten’ gift, I guess.”

Kevin ran a hand over the monkey’s soft fur. “But it’s October.”

“Well, I didn’t get to see her on her real first day of Kindergarten, did I?” Connor snapped, feeling annoyed now at Kevin’s reluctance. Why couldn’t he just accept the gift and let him inside? He wanted to see Charlie and Kevin’s home. “I haven’t seen her since our last day at Disney World, you know.”

Connor bit his tongue—hard—as he fought the urge to say something snarky or angry or flippant, in
response to Kevin’s reluctance.

But, he couldn’t do that. He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t because he knew everything Kevin had been through with his parents and with his sexuality. He knew Kevin's story better than anyone. Hell, he was the only one who knew it, really. Kevin’s concern about his parents’ reaction wasn’t crazy or unfounded—just unbelievably heartbreaking.

“Don’t worry,” Connor conceded, the tone of his voice turning low and sad. “I get it.”

Forcing himself not to cry, he roughly pushed the stuffed monkey back into his bag. He was trying so hard to keep the hurt he felt from showing on his face, but Kevin’s next few words would prove just how much he'd failed at that.

“Wait,” Kevin sighed, placing a hand over the stuffed monkey, whose tiny little face was peeking halfway out of the bag. “I, um… I actually think you should come inside. I know Charlie would love to see you.”

“It’s really okay, Kevin.” Connor waved him off. “You don’t have to do this—"

“No,” Kevin cut him off. “I want you to come in. I’d love to show you the house and Charlie’s room and everything. I really did mean what I said in the note… I want her to get to know you.” Letting out a nervous breath, he smiled expectantly. “So, what do you say?”

With a stupidly large grin sliding onto his face, Connor nodded and pulled Bananas the monkey back out of his bag.

“Hey, hun,” Kevin said, bending down and running a hand through Charlie’s dark curls. “Somebody’s here to see you.” He leaned back on his heels, so Charlie could get a better look at their mystery guest. Her eyes lit up the moment they set eyes on Connor, making Kevin grin so wide his cheeks practically hurt. He hadn’t expected this moment to mean as much to him as it did, but when Connor kneeled down to the floor, beside the half-built Lego house Charlie was making for her My Little Ponies, he felt as though his heart might explode.

“Uncle Connor!” Charlie screamed, lunging her little body at the laughing redhead with the outstretched arms. “Uncle Connor!”

“Charlie!”

Kevin’s little girl wasted no time and, within a split second, was already crawled up on Connor’s lap, arms wrapped eagerly around his neck, crying out high-pitched exclamations of joy. The babysitter Kevin had hired for the evening looked surprised at the sudden outburst of joy. The poor young woman had been attempting to win Charlie’s good graces for the past hour and a half, somewhat unsuccessfully. It wasn’t her fault though—Charlie was just upset that her daddy was going out for the night without her, an occurrence that happened few and far between.

Squeezing the little girl in his arms, Connor rocked her back and forth, one of his rosy cheeks pushed into her bouncy curls.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered into her ear as he hugged her tight. “I’ve missed you so much.”
“I missed you, too!” Charlie cried, pulling back a little. As she did so, Kevin could see how glassy Connor’s eyes had gotten, shimmering in the dim light of the living room.

“I got you a little something.” Connor beamed and held out the stuffed monkey in front of her, to which the little girl quickly grabbed onto with a squeal. “Do you like him?”

“I love him!” She said, quickly pressing Bananas tightly to her chest. “Does he have a name?”

“Well, I’ve been calling him Bananas for the past two months, but you can call him anything you want.” Connor smiled, reaching down and cupping her cheek in his hand. “He’s all yours, sweetie.”

“Bananas,” she repeated, pulling the monkey from her chest so she could study him more closely. Nodding with approval, she beamed at Connor. “He looks like a Bananas to me!”

As Connor laughed, Kevin could see a lone tear falling out of one of his eyes. He quickly wiped it away, but Kevin had already caught it.

“Hey,” Kevin whispered, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. “You alright?”

“Yeah.” He nodded, wiping at his eyes. “I’m good.”

“Bananas,” Charlie said with authority. “This is Cuddles.” She then placed her favorite teddy bear, the one Kevin had gotten her last summer at Lagoon Amusement Park, in front of Bananas, so they could meet properly. “Cuddles, this is Bananas. He’s gonna be our new best friend, okay?”

Hunching over, she pretended to listen to the bear’s response. Nodding with understanding, she turned back up to face Connor, looking rather sheepish. “Uncle Connor? Cuddles is feeling a little jealous of Bananas.”

“Cuddles,” Connor reprimanded, feigning a sense of sternness. “Is that true?”

“It is.” Charlie nodded, sadly. She then grabbed Bananas and smushed him up against Cuddles. “It’s okay, Cuddles. I love both of you the same amount. You don’t have to be jealous.” Making Cuddles jump up and down in happy excitement, she turned back to Connor. “He said it’s okay!”

“I’m glad,” Connor said, clearly struggling to suppress a giggle. “I’d hate to be the cause of any domestic squabbles.”

Charlie grinned, pressing her old stuffy and her new stuffy up against each other, as though they were hugging.

“Alright, now that we’ve sorted that out,” Kevin said, lifting both Charlie and her stuffies up off the floor and into his arms. “What do you say we give Uncle Connor a quick tour of the house, huh?”

“Yeah!”

With Charlie balanced on his hip, Kevin showed Connor around their rather modest two-story home. The first stop was the kitchen with it’s red apple and country-themed décor, decorated mostly by his aunt and mother when he’d first moved in. It was small, equipped with only the basic essentials: a stove, microwave, coffee pot, and a refrigerator. There was some counter space where a few small appliances sat and the room had a round table with only two chairs in the center. He brought Connor outside next, to the little outdoor porch that sat adjacent to the kitchen. Kevin spent many a late night out there, sipping on coffee and reading underneath the stars, whenever he had trouble sleeping. He had trouble sleeping most nights.

After showing Connor around the rest of the house, they finally came to Charlie’s bedroom, Kevin’s
favorite room in the whole house. He’d taken great care in setting it up exactly right when they first moved in. He’d painted the walls in soft pastel colors—pinks, yellows, and blues mostly—and bought her princess-themed dressers. Her bed was pretty too, with it’s ruffled skirt and ceiling-high canopy. But Kevin’s favorite part of the room were the designs on the walls. He’d used a Disney stencil set and airbrush kit to adorn her walls with several of his favorite Disney characters—Peter Pan and Tinkerbell on one wall; Simba, Timon, and Pumba from *The Lion King* on another; and above her bed sat his absolute favorite design of them all—Ariel, Flounder, and Sebastian from *The Little Mermaid*.

“Look!” Charlie cried out to Connor, jumping down from Kevin’s arms and pointing to the little murals. “Daddy made these for me! Aren’t they the best?”

“Wait a second, you drew these?” Connor gasped, tone full of surprise. He looked impressed, but also rather wistful, as he ran a hand over Timon and Pumba. Looking up from the wall, he met Kevin’s eyes. “They’re amazing.”

“Oh, um—no, not really.” Kevin shrugged, rubbing nervously at the back of his neck. “I didn’t design them or anything. I just used stencils.”

“Still,” Connor said with a soft smile as he walked over to observe the *Little Mermaid* ones above the bed. He ran a slow hand over Ariel. “They’re beautiful.”

After the tour, Kevin had to go through the whole spiel of saying a rather lengthy, drawn-out goodbye to Charlie. She’d made quite the scene earlier in the evening when Kevin tried to gently explain to her that the nice babysitter he hired would be reading to her and tucking her into bed that night instead of Aunt Naba or her grandmother. Now that he and Connor would be going out together fairly often (at least, he hoped so), he didn’t want to burden his friends or cause any unwanted suspicion with his parents. He was able to find a good *not* Mormon babysitter from several towns over to watch Charlie, all thanks to *Care.com*.

“Daddy has to go out now,” he knelt down and explained to Charlie. “But I’ll be back before you wake up tomorrow, okay? Then I’ll attempt to make us blueberry pancakes and we’ll watch Nickelodeon. Deal?”

Lips puckered out sadly, his daughter glanced up at the babysitter, giving her a skeptical look. The poor woman already looked exhausted and the night had barely even begun.

“Why can’t Uncle Connor watch me?” Charlie asked, arms wrapped around Kevin's neck.

The unexpected question made Kevin freeze. How could he possibly answer that without telling her the truth—that he and her Uncle Connor were going out *together*? Pulling back, he nervously cleared his throat, racking his brain for some sort of falsified answer, to pull something out of his ass, but just as he went to speak, Connor swooped in and saved him.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie, but I can’t tonight,” Connor gently apologized to the little girl, kneeling down to meet her eyes. “But I’ll be back again real soon, okay? Then we can play games and maybe watch a movie or something and have fun, alright?”

Charlie pouted, of course, but she eventually let Kevin go. She hugged him tightly goodbye one last time, followed by Connor, who seemed rather moved by the gesture.

“So, we’ll be back pretty late,” Kevin said to the babysitter, once they were out of Charlie's earshot. “Probably not until two or three in the morning. You’re welcome to watch TV or sleep on the couch after you put Charlie to bed.”
“Two or three in the morning?” Connor gasped, as Kevin closed the door behind them. “Do you really think we’ll be out that late?”

“Oh, yeah,” Kevin said, handing Connor the extra sweater. “Put this in your bag. You’ll need it later.”

Connor shoved the sweater in his bag and proceeded to loop his arm around Kevin’s, pulling him close as they walked to the car. As he did so, a feeling of warmth trickled through Kevin’s body at the touch, reminding him yet again how not ready he was for all of this. But doing this, being with Connor, also felt so damn good, that it was enough to cloud over all of those negative feelings, forcing them to retreat to the back of his mind. He felt warm and happy and excited—he was going on a date with Connor McKinley.

“What could you possibly have planned that would keep us out until three in the morning?” Connor asked. “You’re not bringing me to one of those seedy motels where you rent the room by the hour, are you?” Kevin knew Connor was only joking by the smirk on his face and that playful glint in his eyes, but when he didn’t answer right away, the other man’s eyes widened. “Wait, that’s not really it… is it?”

“Come on.” Kevin rolled his eyes, a smile playing at his lips. “You know me better than that.”

“Then what is it?” Connor pressed. “What are we doing?”

With a mischievous smirk, Kevin opened the passenger side door and gestured for Connor to get in. “A lot.”

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The drive from Kevin’s house in the small town of Kaysville to the bustling metropolis of Salt Lake City only took about thirty minutes.

Kevin had been back in Utah for years now and, other than Uganda, he’d never really lived anywhere else. He was used to it by now, so he didn’t really think much of the scenic landscapes that surrounded them as they drove. Connor sure seemed mesmerized by all of it, however. Despite having grown up in Utah, Connor had spent most of his adult life in New York City, where it was nearly impossible to do all of the things Kevin took for granted, such as watching the sun set or laying on a blanket beneath the stars or taking in the smell of crisp Autumn air. There were certainly no long-stretching mountain ranges or vast, open spaces in the concrete jungle of New York City.

As they drove along the highway, windows half-way open and a cool breeze flowing through, the sun began its descent beyond the horizon. The sky burned a warm shade of orange-pink; the air smelled fresh and clean, a mixture of burning firewood and dried leaves.

Kevin wanted to set a bit of a romantic mood, so he turned the radio to his favorite station. As the soft, lyrical country music filled the car, Connor lazily cocked his head to the side and sent Kevin a glare, one designed to subtly tease him without using any words. Kevin just responded with a grin, knowing that although Connor always said he absolutely despised country music, he actually had a soft spot for this kind of country music—the kind that was melodic and gentle and romantic. Kevin should know, considering how many car rides they’d taken together. When they first returned home from Uganda, they used to go on long drives all the time; the longest, as far as they could possibly go—always along the scenic route.
A peaceful silence came over the pair as they drove along, down towards the city. The gentle music and striking scenery mixed together to set a rather cozy mood, one that didn't require a lot of talking to be enjoyable. Kevin glanced over at Connor once the silence had gone on for a long time, placing a hand on his thigh and giving it a squeeze. The redhead was busy staring out the window, seemingly enamored with the long, glorious stretches of landscape. A sliver of shiny pink sunlight was hitting his cheek in just the right spot, making his skin glow. Kevin always liked it whenever his skin glowed.

“What are you thinking about?” Kevin asked eventually, gently breaking the silence.

“Nothing really.” Connor turned away from the window to face Kevin, a warm smile on his face. “I just forgot how beautiful it is, that’s all.”

Their destination for dinner that night was a place Kevin and Connor were both intimately familiar with: the Blue Plate Diner.

The restaurant was not chosen at random—no, there was theme for the night. Kevin was trying to re-create their very first date back in America. He just hoped Connor would find the gesture to be romantic and thoughtful, instead of dumb and silly.

“Oh my God,” Connor snorted as they pulled up to the rustic, old diner. “You cannot be serious right now.”

“There’s a theme for tonight.” Kevin grinned as he hopped out of the car, Connor doing the same. He briefly thought about linking their hands together as they walked, but quickly decided against it. They were in public, now. Things had to be different in public. For now, at least. Only for now.

“Can you guess what it is?”

“A theme?” Connor laughed as they walked towards the diner. “Okay, um… let me think.” He hummed for a moment. “Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives?”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “No.”

“Thirty Dollars a Day?” Connor tried again, but Kevin just scoffed at that one. “Paula’s Home Cooking?”

“You’re literally just listing Food Network shows,” Kevin said, opening the door to the diner and letting Connor inside. “Ready to give up?”

“Yeah, I have no idea,” Connor said, but before Kevin could answer, the other man stopped in his tracks, his blue eyes lighting up the moment they landed on something in the back of the room. “Oh my God, look… our table’s free!” He grinned at Kevin and grabbed his hand, leading him eagerly to the back of the diner.

By our table, Connor was referring to the table they always used to sit at whenever they’d come here. It was their favorite because it was sort of far away from everyone else and it was right next to the jukebox. The jukebox was ancient and filled only with oldies music—mostly Elvis and 1950s’ doo-wop. They used to pick the silliest ones they could find in the catalog and then proceed to either sing them loudly or dance to them, like the stupid, young kids they were. The memory made Kevin smile, every time he thought about it.
He could still remember exactly what they'd ordered, too, on their first real date back in America—breakfast for dinner, consisting of: two coffees, western omelets and a side of sausage, to share. They sat there for a good two hours that night, eating and laughing and talking, drinking cup after cup of mediocre coffee, like the blasphemous pair of ex-Mormons they were. On a whim, Connor put a dollar into the jukebox, just for fun—he was always doing things just for fun. They had a bet going over whether or not the old thing would still work. Connor had won, of course, because it did still work, and they ended up dancing together to a slow Elvis song, while the rest of the patrons stared at them. And they kept on dancing and singing, every single time they went there, despite the disapproving looks they would sometimes get from everyone else in the room. Connor sure as Hell hadn’t cared what people thought—he still didn’t—and Kevin hadn’t cared all that much either, back then. The problem was that he did care now. Very much so.

Feeling a little overwhelmed at the memory, Kevin reached across the table and took Connor’s hands into his own, giving them an urgent squeeze. The thought of putting on a slow song and asking Connor to dance bombarded him with a flood of emotions, mostly good ones—but then he would be filled with a surge of even stronger emotions, mostly bad ones, over the fact that he couldn’t.

“You okay?” Connor asked, voice turning soft. “You got really quiet all of a sudden.”

“Of course I’m okay,” Kevin said, trying to sound convincing. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You seemed really happy a minute ago,” Connor said. “And now you don’t.” He paused for a moment and looked down with a shrug. “We don’t have to sit here if you don’t want to… if it makes you uncomfortable or something. I just thought it might be fun to sit in our old seat.”

“Connor,” Kevin said, softly, trying to push those negative thoughts out of his head. “I am okay and I do want to sit here. I really do. I was just… thinking, that’s all.”

Connor eyed him carefully. “About?”

He gazed past Connor’s shoulder, over at the old jukebox that sat behind him. He wondered briefly if anyone else ever bothered to play it, besides him and Connor. He secretly hoped somebody did, sometimes. It deserved to get played. He glanced around at all of the patrons, sitting in the diner, looking happy—eating, laughing, talking. Most of them were probably Mormon—and probably very conservative. Most of them would probably shake their heads or whisper cruel things behind their backs or maybe even leave if Kevin decided to be silly and put on an Elvis song and ask Connor to dance, like they used to do. He wanted to do everything they used to do, but they couldn’t. Not now, not here, not with all of these people watching them; not with everything that had happened.

“I was just thinking,” Kevin said as he turned back to Connor, forcing his voice to regain some of it’s joviality; “that I’m, um… that I’m really happy you’re here with me tonight.”

Cheeks turning to apples, Connor blushed shyly and waved him off. Turning back down to look at his menu and without missing a beat, he suggested: “So, breakfast for dinner?”

Kevin’s earlier grin returned to his face with a vengeance. “You just read my mind.”

“Okay.” Connor beamed as they stepped into the line at Clark Planetarium. “I think I’m starting to get the theme now.”
“Yeah?” Kevin asked, stupid grin on his face. “What is it?”

“You,” he said, as he fiddled with a button on Kevin’s sweater. “Are re-creating our first date back in Utah.”

“Bingo,” Kevin said, bopping Connor on the nose. “Took you long enough to guess.”

They bought tickets for two back-to-back space shows, just like they did the last time they were here; each one, thirty minutes long. *Ultimate Universe* and *Love Beneath the Stars*.

“*Ultimate Universe,*” Kevin said, reading the pamphlet as they took their seats in the dimly-lit circular dome theatre. “A stunning journey across the cosmos.”

“Mmm,” Connor hummed as he leaned back into his seat. “Sounds thrilling.”

Kevin smirked, then used the pamphlet to bop him on the head. “You always act like it’s going to bore you to death, but then you always end up *loving* it.”

He was right; that was Connor’s usual motif. Deep down, he had to admit to himself that it was quite romantic. Snuggling up together in a darkened room, beneath a blanket of stars, pointing out constellations and giggling softly at the loud, booming voice of the narrator.

As the lights darkened to the point where nothing could be seen other than the twinkling stars above them, Connor mustered up enough courage to lean in and wrap an arm around Kevin’s waist. As expected, he felt the brunette flinch a little, tensing up at the touch. He didn’t think Kevin would be ready for that kind of public display of affection just yet, but he just wanted to try, considering all of the lights were off. Deciding not to take it personally, he whispered an apology in Kevin's ear and pulled his arm back. However, not even a moment later, he felt Kevin quickly reach out and bring his arm back, circling it around his waist.

Leaning down close to his ear, he heard Kevin whisper a soft, barely audible *it’s okay*. With a big grin, Connor leaned in closer, relaxing into the touch and nuzzling his cheek into the softness of Kevin’s sweater. Much to his surprise, he felt Kevin lean down and press a delicate kiss to the top of his head. Smiling to himself, Connor closed his eyes and tried his hardest to burn the memory of this moment, this feeling, into his brain. He wanted to soak up every last ounce of it, almost in fear that it might be fleeting, as though it might be snatched from him at any moment, never allowed to experience it again. Kevin lifted his lips off of his hair and reached out for Connor's hand, tangling their fingers together and resting them atop his lap.

Kevin had always been a bit of an astronomy nerd. Connor had known this fact way back in Uganda. Back then, many of their “dates” consisted of laying on a blanket in the yard, the pitch black night sky above them, twinkling with stars. They would lay close together, Connor’s head resting atop Kevin’s chest, hands intertwined, just like they were tonight, and Kevin would point up at the sky and tell Connor all about the different constellations. Connor didn’t really care all that much about the star formations above them, other than how beautiful they looked, but he could listen to Kevin go on and on about them forever, his voice excited and authoritative as he spoke. It was calming and pleasant to his ears, listening to Kevin. He had assumed wrongly, at the time, that they’d have all the time in the world to gaze up at the stars together. Little did he know, their time together would get cut short only two years later. It was something Connor McKinley could have never predicted.

But, Connor was happy, and thankful, for their second chance *now*, for being able to gaze up at the synthetic stars right here in *Clark Planetarium* at twenty-eight years old—holding hands, cuddling, Kevin whispering little factual tidbits into his ear during each and every lull in the narration.
At about quarter to ten, they pulled up to their last and final stop of the night: the Redwood Drive-In Theatre. All tickets were sold as double features, which meant not one, but two movies, back to back.

They had everything they’d need for four and a half fun-filled hours at the drive-in: chips, popcorn, sodas, candy—even a blanket and pillow, courtesy of Kevin’s linen closet.

“Do you remember what we did the last time we came here?” Kevin asked as he pulled up to their spot—slightly off the side, but still close enough to get a good view of the screen. Kevin had chosen this particular spot because he was maybe planning on giving Connor a kiss on the lips at some point during the night and didn’t want any prying eyes getting a glimpse inside their car. It would be his first real kiss in nearly five years. “We didn’t have enough money for real tickets, so we parked behind the flea market.”

“I remember,” Connor snorted. “We couldn’t even see the screen.”

“Hey, it wasn’t all bad.” Kevin nudged him in the side. “We still had the audio.”

“It didn’t matter, anyway. We were too busy doing… other things.” Connor giggled mischievously at the memory, making Kevin’s cheeks flush. He watched as Connor gripped the handlebar beneath his seat, to recline it backwards and make it more comfortable. “Ah, that’s better.” He then reached over and grabbed half the blanket from Kevin, draping it over himself, along with snatching the pillow and the bag of popcorn away from him. Connor McKinley, without fail, always stole the popcorn.

But Kevin didn’t mind. Connor looked so cute like that—snuggled up cozy beneath the blanket, bag of buttered popcorn resting atop his belly. The urge to kiss Connor before the movie even started surged through him, but he couldn’t. Not yet. It wasn’t the right moment yet.

Sipping on the hot apple cider they’d bought at the snack bar, he tuned the radio to 94.3. It was the station that would allow them to hear the audio for that night’s classic movies showcase: Dirty Dancing, followed up by Casablanca.

“We don’t have to stay for both movies if you don’t want,” Kevin said as he glanced down at the clock, feeling a bit self-conscious about the length of their date. They’d stayed for both movies the last time they came here, seven years prior, but that was a very long time ago and he thought, things might be different now—and that would be okay. They were both older and had earlier bedtimes than they used to.

“And miss out not only on Casablanca, but also spending four hours alone with you in a very dimly lit car?” Connor teased, leaning a bit closer to Kevin. “I wouldn’t even dream of it.”

A great big grin broke out on Kevin’s face and he could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks again. He turned onto his side, so he could properly face his date in the passenger seat, curled up under the blanket, crunching on kernels of popcorn.

“Good,” Kevin said, reaching out and looping an arm around Connor’s waist. “How’s your cider?”

“Delicious,” Connor beamed, scooting his body closer to Kevin’s, so they were almost touching. "Just like—,” he walked his fingers up Kevin’s shirt before poking him on the nose; “—you.”
He knew he was probably blushing again at the remark, but he didn’t care. Connor was Connor and Connor had always been very good at making him blush.

“And you’re having fun, right?” Kevin asked for about the fourth or fifth time that evening. He just wanted to make absolutely sure—he wasn’t insecure or anything. Well, maybe just a little bit.

“So much fun,” Connor assured him with a grin. “Thank you for doing all of this, really. You didn’t have to.”

“Yes I did, and you don’t have to thank me,” Kevin said, softly. He could hear exactly how soft, but Connor had always had that affect on him, especially when they were this close. “There isn’t anywhere else I’d rather be.”

Connor searched his eyes for a moment. “Do you really mean that?”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it,” Kevin whispered, absentmindedly moving his hand down to rest atop the slight curve of Connor’s waist. He could hear a breath hitch in Connor’s throat as he slid his hand up, over the soft skin, gently pushing the cloth out of the way. Grinning dumbly at the shocked expression on Connor’s face, Kevin gripped at the other man’s hip, pulling him closer. They could hear the beginning music of the movie pour through the radio, but Kevin didn’t want to pry his eyes away from Connor’s—not yet, anyway; and it seemed as though the other man was having the exact same dilemma.

Kevin had no idea what he was doing. He felt like a teenager all over again, as though it were suddenly eight years prior and he and Connor were back in Uganda, laying across from one another on Kevin’s bed, playing a rousing game of Scrabble. He could recall the moment as though it had just happened yesterday, could remember how angry he had gotten at Connor, for being about to win again, like he always did. Kevin flipped the board over in an angry rage, pieces splattering all over the bedspread, while Connor just calmly watched on as they toppled. Always knowing more about Kevin’s feelings than Kevin did, Connor asked him, not without a smirk, what it was that was bothering him. Kevin’s answer: Connor. Connor was bothering him—he was bothering him in the most wondrous, magnificent kind of a way, the kind of way that made a person ache inside. And then, in a moment of instinct, he leaned down and pressed a kiss to Connor’s lips; inexperienced, wet, and awkward—magnificent.

And now here he was, yet again, in the same vulnerable position of being too inexperienced—now even more so, considering his age—and having absolutely no idea what to do or what to say or whether or not he even should do what he really wanted to do or if Connor even wanted him to do it—well, of course he did, but how could Kevin ever really know for certain?

It was all so hard.

Here he was, twenty-eight years old, scared to death of giving his date a little kiss. He was a man, for Christ sakes—a grown ass man. He shouldn’t be so afraid of giving Connor a kiss. But he was; and that was the simple truth.

“We should probably watch the movie,” Kevin stammered, uncomfortably. His voice sounded nervous—sort of shakky. And he hadn’t quite realized it, but his face was awfully close to Connor’s now, their noses slightly pressed together. How did they get so close? The movie had barely even started. The two of them had always been like this though, kind of like magnets: polar opposites and, yet, somehow impossibly attracted.

“You’re probably right,” Connor hummed, scooting his body closer to Kevin’s in such a way that made the hand resting atop the curve of his waist—Kevin’s hand—slide down just a little bit further.
“I mean, we paid for it and all. It would be a shame to waste it, don’t you think?”

He could feel Connor’s hot breath tickling at his lips, they were so close. In a moment of mental lapse, he moved his hand up and down along the curve of Connor’s waist, caressing the impossible softness of his skin. It was still just as soft as he remembered it being, all those years ago. And his eyes were still just as blue, too, and his hair—though now speckled with the faintest bits of grey from the slow, ever-present passage of time—was still such a lovely shade of light strawberry; and his face, laced with the tiniest laugh lines around the corners of his mouth and eyes, looked just as beautiful; and his lips, just as plump and pink as they had been the day they’d kissed for the very first time—the most important day there ever was, besides the day Charlie was born.

Without thinking and, perhaps, lost in the memory, he closed his eyes and leaned down, pressing his lips to the rather smooth ones belonging to Connor McKinley. He heard noise after noise escape the other man’s mouth as he pressed in further, exploring with the tentative nervousness Kevin often felt when doing things like this—things of the romantic nature.

It would seem as though Connor hadn’t been expecting Kevin to kiss him like that, despite the romantic mood and their close proximity. The idea that he’d surprised Connor thrilled him a little, causing him to giggle softly right into the other man’s mouth. Between the weird noises Connor was still making and the general absurdity of it all, there was really nothing else Kevin could do, but laugh.

Pulling back ever-so-slightly, their noses nestled beside one another—too close to see one another properly, but too far away to be kissing—Connor murmured into Kevin’s mouth. “What’s so funny?”

Shaking his head and sobering up his features, he whispered. “Nothing. Nothing’s funny.”

Pressing another kiss to Connor’s lips, he let himself get lost in the moment, drowning in the feeling of their mutual affection. It was something he hadn’t allowed himself to do since he was twenty-one years old. Sliding a hand up the back of Connor’s shirt, he relished in the feeling of the other man’s smooth skin against his own, silken over time from those lotions Connor loved so much.

The kiss was filled with more intensity and more emotion than Kevin could have ever imagined, even in his wildest dreams, each of them devouring the other as though their lives depended on it. It was as though they each held something inside of them, something secret and buried, that the other desperately craved, and swallowing the other’s mouth was the only surefire way to get to it.

And Kevin did crave Connor, with every ounce of his being. He’d just been very good at hiding it all these years, at holding it in so nobody could see it—not even himself. But it all came flooding out of him the moment their lips met, igniting a spark inside of him that he never wanted to burn out—he never wanted this feeling to go away. It felt too impossibly good to let it go away. He just wished he could live adjoined to Connor’s lips for the rest of his life. That was all he wanted. He supposed that if everything went according to plan—maybe, just maybe, he could.

Melting into the moment, neither of them were paying much attention to the movie playing in the background. Bags of chips were getting crushed between them, popcorn kernels falling to the floor, hands traveling up shirts and over skin. He could hear Connor making sounds, moaning into their kiss, and it was hard for Kevin not to grin like an idiot because every noise that came out of Connor’s mouth was because of him, because of what he was doing—and they were all muffled and surprised and pleading and perfect. Where he had felt nervousness just moments before had somehow turned into a calm desire, one of longing and bliss, coming together to fill the moment with a kind of purity—of raw, pent-up feelings, bubbling to the surface like an overflowing pot of boiling water.
He absentmindedly moved his hand from sliding up and down Connor’s back, down to the curve of his waist. It was delightful, feeling the man in his arms squirm and moan at the touch. Without much warning, Connor moved closer to Kevin, nearly sitting atop his lap. He bucked his hips into Kevin’s thigh a few times, kissing no longer seeming to be enough for him. Lips still locked, Kevin heard Connor groan into his mouth, but it was a different kind of groan than before. Slowly and rather timidly, Connor took hold of Kevin’s hand and trailed it over his stomach, before gently guiding it down to rest in-between his legs.

Despite being hazy and drunk off their kiss, Kevin still felt momentarily frozen. He then felt his hand being pressed further down into the hardness that lived beneath Connor’s pants. Feeling the sudden onset of panic, his chest began to tighten, his breathing, becoming harsher and more labored than before. He wasn’t ready for that yet. Taking in a deep breath and reminding himself that he was safe—he was safe with Connor—he tried to calm down. Knowing he wasn’t ready to do that yet and especially not in public, he shakily lifted his hand out of Connor’s pants, flailing it around in search of Connor’s hand, only stopping once he found it. Intertwining their fingers together once again, he moved their joined hands to rest atop Connor’s thigh. He wasn’t ready to do anything more than kissing this evening—that much, he was certain of, but he also didn’t want to ruin the moment—it was too special to ruin. It was perfect.

Opening his eyes, Kevin pulled back slightly, watching as Connor’s eyelids fluttered open. As they met each other’s gaze for the first time since they’d started kissing, Kevin could see the raw hunger that lived inside of Connor’s eyes. But it wasn’t only hunger he found there. His eyes also looked gentle and loving and pleading and soft, all at the same time. Biting his lip and moving their hands further away from Connor’s lap, Kevin shook his head, murmuring a quiet not yet into the other man’s mouth. He just hoped it wouldn’t ruin the moment, that’s all; or their evening, or crush Connor’s self-esteem, as it had been crushed many years before, when Kevin wasn’t ready.

Thankfully, it didn’t do any of those things.

With an understanding nod, Connor whispered an it’s okay into Kevin’s mouth before pressing their lips together once more. Shuddering a little at the feeling of Connor’s tongue sliding into his mouth, gliding up against his own, Kevin forgot all about his former discomfort and quickly melted back into the kiss. Arms circled around Connor’s waist, he pulled him close; spilling mulled cider all over the cup holders and hearing a bag of potato chips crunch between them.

He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d felt so at peace. He couldn’t begin to think of the last time. The feeling was too overwhelming to hazard a guess. Connor was back in his arms, finally; fingers entangled in each other’s hair, skin gliding across skin, tongues across tongues.

He vowed to never forget this moment, this feeling, for as long as he lived—especially not when things got tough later on—and they would, inevitably, get tough.

By the start of the second movie, Connor McKinley was on a cloud nine. Kevin Price had kissed him. They'd kissed each other—on the lips.

And this time, it wasn’t some chaste little peck on the cheek or atop his head or to his hand; it was a real, honest to God kiss, equipped with all of the feeling and passion he’d hoped would still be there, after all these years. His belly was full of diner food and snacks and mulled cider. One of his favorite
movies of all time about to start up. And Kevin Price was by his side, once again, arm slung over his shoulder, holding him close.

Connor couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so happy. He knew how corny the sentiment sounded, but it was the truth, regardless—the raw, honest truth.

“I’ve never seen *Casablanca,*” Kevin said idly as the film started up. He took in a big, loud slurp of his diet Coke. “Is it any good?”

“Is it any good?” Connor scoffed, scooting back so he could properly look Kevin in the eyes. “Did you just say *is it any good*? It’s only one of the greatest movies ever created in the history of film.”

Kevin’s eyebrows raised at that before shoveling a handful of popcorn in his mouth. “That good, huh?”

“Have I seriously never made you watch it before?”

“No,” Kevin said, through a mouthful of popcorn. “Unless maybe you did and I forgot it.”

“It’s not very forgettable,” Connor chided, poking a finger into Kevin’s belly. “Okay, well this is serious business then—your first time watching *Casablanca.* You have to pay attention.”

“Does that mean no kissing?” Kevin asked, upon finally swallowing the popcorn in his mouth.

“During your first time watching *Casablanca*?” Connor scoffed. "Definitely no kissing.”

Before he had the chance to say much else, Connor’s cheeks were being cupped and tilted upward, just so Kevin could lay a big, fat kiss to his lips. Laughing through the kiss, Connor was reminded exactly why Kevin Price—the *real* Kevin Price—had been more than worth the wait.

As *Casablanca*’s ending credits rolled down the giant screen and gentle music flowed through the speakers, they were both lulled into a peaceful calm; the mood, warm and cozy. Kevin’s arms were draped around Connor’s waist, fingers lazily exploring the soft, porcelain skin. Their cheeks were pressed together, lips lightly touching.

A new song eventually came over the radio, one that sounded melodic and slow—*romantic,* even. Kevin let his mind drift away, imagining himself and Connor slow dancing to the song outside the car, under the soft glow of the moon, the starlight. That would be the perfect end to a perfect date, Kevin thought.

As their lips lingered on one another’s, gentle and lazy, Connor’s eyes began to close part-way. Kevin’s thoughts wandered to just a few hours before, to when they had dinner at the Blue Plate Diner, where he’d been so very tempted to put money in that ancient jukebox and ask Connor to dance. It had sort of become their thing, their tradition, many years before. But even if he’d chickened out at the diner, they still had the opportunity *now—here.* It was late enough and all of the other cars that were surrounding their spot earlier in the evening had all vacated. From what Kevin could tell from looking outside the window, they were essentially alone.

Sitting up a little straighter, he took in a deep breath, readying himself to ask Connor if he’d perhaps like to step outside and slow dance to the music, like stupid children, under the stars. But as he
tapped Connor’s back, he caught the sight of a few members of the theatre’s clean-up crew collecting bags of trash near one of the port-a-johns. Turning to look out the other window, he could now see there were still a few patrons lingering about, sitting on the hood of one of the cars. With a sad sigh, Kevin decided against it. He may have been brave enough to do things like that when they were younger, but he wasn’t feeling brave enough today.

“Connor,” Kevin whispered into his ear. He tapped his back again. “We have to sit up. It’s time to go.”

“Mmm?” Connor hummed into Kevin’s mouth, sitting up just enough to glance at the clock—it was already two thirty in the morning. “It’s so late, Kevin,” he groaned, flopping his cheek back down against Kevin’s chest. “Can’t we just stay right here?” He pressed his tired body deeper into Kevin’s side. “We can sleep right here, just like this. It’ll be just like camping.”

Gazing down at the very sleepy man in his arms, Kevin smiled. “That sounds amazing.”

“Then it’s a plan,” Connor mumbled, nuzzling his cheek further into the softness of Kevin’s sweater. “We’ll stay just like this until the sun comes up.”

“Hmmmm,” Kevin hummed, reaching up to run his fingers through Connor’s hair. “There’s just one little problem with that.”

“What’s that?”

“I kind of have a daughter waiting for me at home,” he chuckled into Connor’s hair, giving the locks a little kiss. “I can’t just spontaneously decide to sleep over at the drive-in. I have responsibilities and stuff. It comes with having a kid. Besides, I don’t think they’ll let us. It’s probably considered loitering or something. We could get arrested.”

Connor groaned. “But I don’t wanna get up.” To illustrate his point further, he snuggled deeper into his chest. “I’m so comfy here.”

“I’m afraid that’s non-negotiable,” Kevin said, tapping Connor’s back, gently.

“But I can’t move,” he complained. “That’s the real problem.”

“You’re right, that is a problem,” Kevin whispered into his ear, letting his lips trail up and down, over the lobe. “Trust me, I wish we could stay exactly like this all night.” He ran a hand along Connor’s arm before giving it a pat. “But we can’t, so come on—sit up.”

“Being an adult is over-rated, you know.”

“It’s like I have two children now,” Kevin teased. He pushed Connor up a little, forcing him to sit up. It wasn’t easy. “Two very stubborn children.”

“Why are you always so mean to me?” Connor groaned as Kevin succeeded at pushing him up. The redhead looked as though he’d just rolled out of bed—hair completely disheveled, clothes rumpled, eyes only part way opened; adorable, perfect.

Finally, he rolled over and flopped back into his own seat, where he let out a light snore as he curled up against the pillow, pulling the blanket up to his chin.
They didn’t get back to Kevin’s house until three o’clock in the morning. They trudged up the front steps—exhausted, laughing softly as Connor sleepily pointed out one of Kevin’s neighbor’s rather tacky light-up religious lawn ornaments.

Slowly creaking the door open, as to not wake anyone, Kevin took Connor by the hand and led him into the kitchen. Whispering quietly, Connor agreed to stay for coffee and ice cream before hitting the road. Kevin didn’t want him falling asleep behind the wheel or anything, so he made him agree to at least one cup of coffee.

He went back out into the living room and gently woke the babysitter, who had passed out on the couch. He handed her the seventy-five dollars she was due, plus an additional twenty-five for staying so late. The poor girl looked downright exhausted, but that wasn’t much of a surprise to Kevin—Charlie could be a handful sometimes, especially when she didn’t have her dad around to tuck her in and read her a bedtime story. The babysitter let Kevin know that Charlie refused to go to sleep until almost one in the morning. The lady sounded apologetic about it, but Kevin knew it hadn’t been her fault; his daughter often touted that she never got tired. A lie, of course, if Kevin had ever heard one, but that never kept Charlie from at least trying to stay up all night.

After the babysitter left, Kevin walked back out into the kitchen, where Connor was busy putting on a small pot of coffee. He was leaning over the counter, legs kicked out behind him, as he filled the pot with water.

Kevin couldn’t help it; his eyes drifted down to Connor’s waist, followed by his bottom, perfectly encased in his light blue skinny jeans. The redhead was humming softly to himself, one of the songs from the ending credits of Casablanca. Kevin stood back by the entrance way to the kitchen, leaning against the arch, taking a moment to simply appreciate Connor, not to mention his own amazing luck. He felt overwhelmingly lucky, that this man, this person, who Kevin had hurt so badly years before, was still able to see the good in him, was able to see past all of his imperfections and fears and hesitations. He cared enough about Kevin to help him overcome those fears, to break out of his shell, and face them. Kevin could have never done that alone. If Connor hadn’t pushed him—pushed him too hard—he’d still be alone and miserable, wallowing in the pain of a falsified life. But now, Kevin never wanted another day to go by where he couldn’t hold Connor in his arms or talk to him about anything and everything under the sun or walk out into his kitchen and see him making a pot of coffee. He wasn’t sure how it was possible, but it was, that Connor McKinley somehow managed to make something as mundane as preparing coffee look so impossibly sexy—he made a lot of things look impossibly sexy. And Kevin was finally starting to understand that it was okay to think that—that it was okay to have these kinds of feelings, even if Connor was a man.

Wordlessly, he walked up behind Connor and wrapped his arms around him. As he rocked him back and forth, he heard the redhead start to giggle at the unexpected touch, so much so that he nearly spilled the pot of water.

“Kevin!”

“Shhh,” he whispered into Connor’s ear, from behind. “Charlie’s sleeping.”

“Sorry, I forgot.” Connor turned around, circling his arms around Kevin’s neck with a soft smile. “Wanna get the ice cream?”

While Connor made their coffees, Kevin did something he was quite skilled at—making kickass ice cream sundaes, equipped with a hefty amount of chocolate syrup, maraschino cherries, whipped cream, and the most important ingredient of all—ice cream. He went with a chocolate, vanilla, and
strawberry mix for Connor and straight up chocolate for himself.

“Mmmm,” Connor hummed, closing his eyes as he took in a bite of his sundae. “This is so good, oh my God.”

Kevin grinned, a bite full of chocolate ice cream in his mouth. “I’m glad.”

It was quiet, but not awkward, as they both devoured their ice cream sundaes. Connor was sat atop the counter, next to the coffee pot, his legs dangling over the side. Kevin was leaning into one of them.  

“I had a great time tonight,” Connor said, softly, as he scraped the bottom of his ice cream dish. A little bit of strawberry ice cream had lodged itself to his upper lip, making Kevin smile. He knew his own face was probably covered in ice cream, as Connor often told him he ate ice cream like a child, but he still got a bit of pleasure in seeing ice cream stuck to Connor’s lip. “Everything was so perfect.”

“I tried,” Kevin said, as he reached up and dabbed Connor’s lip with a napkin. “You had a little right here.” He smirked, pointing to his lip.

“Oh, yeah?” Connor snorted. “Well, you have some right here,” he said, motioning to his entire face. “Dummy. Hand me a napkin.” Kevin obeyed, laughing as Connor wiped at his face with vigor. “There. All clean.”

“Kiss me,” Kevin demanded, simply, stepping between Connor’s legs and pulling his lips down to meet his own. Though seemingly surprised at the action, Connor quickly returned the kiss; lips cool and sweet from ice cream and syrup. “You taste like strawberries,” Kevin whispered appreciatively into his mouth, a grin forming on his lips.

“Mmm. Is it yummy?” Connor laughed before leaning back in for another kiss.

“Very.”

They stayed like that for a while, coffee and ice cream on their lips, tongues swirling around each other’s tongues. Kevin gripped at Connor’s waist, followed by his bottom, then back up to his waist again, pressing himself against the counter. Drunk from ice cream and kissing and exhaustion, Kevin pulled back after a minute and asked: “Dance with me?”

“What?” Connor chuckled, pulling back and looking surprised. “There’s no music.”

“We have phones,” Kevin said, curling his fingers around Connor’s waist. “We can make our own music.”

Mouth sliding up into a grin, Connor nodded. Hopping down off the counter, he grabbed his phone. “You pick,” he said, handing it to Kevin to make a selection.

After a bit of searching, he found the song they used to dance to all the time, back at the Blue Plate Diner. Their favorite song to dance to at the diner had always been Elvis Presley’s I Can’t Help Falling in Love with You. A perfect song for tonight, Kevin thought, as he went to click the play button. But as the song began to play, he quickly remembered about his daughter sleeping soundly in the next room. He didn't want to wake her and he certainly didn’t want her to wander out here and find him getting close and intimate with her Uncle Connor. So, he shut it off and pointed toward their rickety old porch adjacent to the kitchen.

“Let’s go outside,” he whispered, softly. “I don’t want to wake Charlie.”
Pulling on their sweaters, they grabbed their coffees and went out onto the porch. They were instantly met with a pang of cool Autumn air and the scent of a neighbor burning firewood. Connor closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, seeming to appreciate the aroma.

Kevin knew his home wasn’t anything to brag about. It was small and old and kind of rickety, but for some reason, he had always really enjoyed the fact that he had a nice porch. It had a small table and chairs that typically didn’t get used by anyone other than himself, not to mention a lovely view of the landscape and night sky. It was perfect for kicking back with a coffee and taking in a breath of fresh air; and, now, he supposed—it was also quite perfect for dancing.

Clicking on their song and setting the volume low enough so that it wouldn’t wake his daughter, Kevin took a very rosy-cheeked Connor into his arms. They danced, close and carefree, like children, under a blanket of twinkling stars, replaying the same song over and over again until the sun began to peek over the horizon.

Connor didn’t leave until about five in the morning, after three cups of coffee and several assurances to Kevin that he was awake enough to drive home. It pained Kevin a little that Connor couldn’t have simply stayed over. It pained him even more so that it was his situation with his parents and his neighbors and his faith that was preventing it. He would have given almost anything to be able to hold him all night long; to wake up alongside him the next morning, giggling over dreams and who was snoring louder the night before and what should they have for breakfast. Then Charlie would come running into Kevin’s room, like she always did, preferably a little later than usual. The three of them would then attempt to make a big batch of blueberry pancakes. Connor could probably cook really good pancakes, Kevin idly thought, if he tried to. Then they would curl up on the couch, like a family, snuggled close together, eating mediocre pancakes and watching cartoons.

He knew they’d get to that point, eventually. He was determined to make it happen. It would happen. It had to happen. It would just take some time and a good amount of courage, that’s all.

As he leaned back against the front door, out of which Connor had just left, and replayed the events of the evening in his mind, he felt the grin on face grow even bigger and stupider than it had been before. It was so big now that it felt nearly impossible for it to ever leave his face.

The hour may have been late—or early, depending on how you looked at it—and maybe he’d only be getting two hours of sleep that night, at most, and his feet may have ached, sore and tired, but none of those things mattered now because he was happy. He was finally happy. He didn’t think he’d ever feel this happy again, ever, in his life—but here he was, smiling like an idiot at five o’clock in the morning with sore feet.

He knew now that he’d made the right decision to take a chance with Connor again, regardless of all of the hardship that was yet to come, with his family; regardless of all that had come before, with the judgment and the anger and the resentment and the pain. Nothing would dissuade him this time around because this right here—this big, stupid smile on his face—was what he deserved. It was what he’d always deserved, despite it all, and it was most certainly what Connor deserved. Hardship or not, Mormon parents or not, child sleeping in the next room or not—he was determined to see this thing through.

On his way to bed, he stopped to check in on Charlie. Cracking the door open a tiny bit, he peered into the little room—the room he’d so carefully designed for his little girl, with it’s walls full of Disney characters and a bed fit for a princess. He’d wanted her to love it and love it she did. Though, now that she was five, the room was also riddled with countless toys and patches of wall adorned with crayon graffiti. It looked well-loved and lived-in.

Placing a bottle of water on the little girl’s nightstand, he sat down on the bed and ran a tender hand
through the little girl’s chocolate curls. Pressing a kiss to her forehead, he whispered a soft goodnight.

Love and happiness, he thought as he gazed down at his baby girl, was what Charlie deserved, too. She deserved a dad who was content and happy and capable of love; one who was able to enjoy life and all of the joys and ups and downs and wondrous miracles it offered; someone who could share that love and joy with her. She deserved to grow up with two loving parents, two people who cared about her, two people who could show her that love between two people—any two people—was perhaps the greatest blessing of them all.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed getting to see Kevin and Connor start things again and be happy. :D This took a lot out of me, so if you enjoyed the chapter, let me know - feedback makes my day!

FYI all the places they went to in this chapter are real places that exist!

The Blue Plater Diner (and, yes, it has a jukebox!! ^_^)
Clark Planetarium
The Redwood Drive-In

Also, Utah is pretty hecking beautiful! I couldn't stop looking up pics and videos.

If you ever want to pop in and say hi, I am also on Tumblr under the same name @elderkevinmckinley
Hello! I am so excited to post a new chapter after three long months of no updates! I am truly sorry about the wait. :( I had two Secret Santas and just a lot of stuff going on. This chapter was also just really important to me, for a multitude of reasons, and I wanted to make sure it was right.

Legend:

*** = Asterisks are memory scenes
___ = Regular lines are present day scenes

Purple Dividers = Kevin POV
Blue Dividers = Connor POV
~ = POV switch within a scene

Feedback makes my day, so if you liked it, let me know! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is ridiculous,” Kevin huffed, eyes darting every which way down the aisle. “Not to mention wildly embarrassing.”

“Here we go again.” Arnold sighed. “For the last time, buying condoms is not ridiculous, buddy. It’s a completely normal thing that adults do.” He then handed a box of said items to Kevin—ultra-ribbed, extra sensitive and completely unnecessary, but before Kevin even had a chance to protest, a triple-pack of various fruit-flavored lubricant was also being thrust into his arms. A triple-pack.

They were in the grocery store, buying everything Kevin would need for his date with Connor McKinley that evening. They were planning on cooking a delicious three-course meal at Kevin’s house, consisting of homemade mini pizza appetizers, steak and veggies, and ice cream sundaes for dessert. After dinner, Kevin would light the fireplace in the living room, where they’d cuddle on the couch and watch a movie. It was sure to be the perfect romantic evening spent alone together while Charlie slept over at Arnold and Naba’s.

What Kevin was not planning to include were the highly personal items Arnold Cunningham was holding up in front of his face, insisting that he needed, now that he and Connor had been dating again for two whole months.

But unlike Arnold, who wore his heart on his sleeve, Kevin found this entire ordeal to be both embarrassing and humiliating. He was a private person who had always gone to great lengths to keep his personal life as private as humanly possible. Granted, this was the first time he’s even had a personal life to speak of since his divorce; but still, there had always been this general discomfort about discussing the matter with anyone. Ironically, he seemed to have the most trouble talking about
it with Connor, a fact he knew made absolutely no sense considering Connor was to be the other person in the sexual equation. Sex was simply an area of life he didn't have much experience in, barring the few excursions he’d had with Connor back in their early twenties—experiences that had never really gone beyond awkward, fumbling touching underneath the covers.

Those were good memories for Kevin; memories that sure felt very far away from him, now.

“I am not buying these in public, Arnold,” Kevin hissed, and promptly tossed the offending items into Arnold’s cart. He scrubbed his hands over the legs of his jeans, as though they were somehow unclean now that he had touched the items. He nervously glanced up and down the aisle, to ensure nobody had seen him. This was his local grocery store, after all. What if Mrs. Mahoney, Charlie’s beady-eyed Kindergarten teacher, saw him here, holding a box of Trojan Ultra-Ribbed condoms? Or, God forbid, his next door neighbor, Nell, caught him casually buying a bottle of KY Jelly—with a man, of all things? They could start to suspect, and Kevin did not want them to suspect.

“You are such a baby,” Arnold sighed, tossing the lube and condoms back into Kevin’s cart. “Grow up, will you? Everyone uses condoms. Everyone. Even Mormons, believe it or not.”

“I’m not arguing with that, but I don’t need my personal business paraded around my local grocery store like a goddamned sideshow,” Kevin whisper-yelled, and proceeded to toss the items back into Arnold’s cart with a bit of a snarky flair. “If you insist I buy these—even though I’ve told you about a thousand times that I’m not ready to have sex with Connor yet, but whatever—then they’re going in your cart. Fair is fair.”

“No,” Arnold said, taking the items out of his cart and dumping them back into Kevin’s. “You need to grow up, buddy. You’re in a real relationship now. I mean, you do want to have sex with him at some point, don’t you?”

Kevin darted his eyes back down the aisle, fearful that someone might have heard Arnold utter the word him. Nobody seemed to be around, however, so he turned back to Arnold and softened his voice. “You know I do.”

“Then you need to grow up and buy the condoms without having a mental breakdown.”

“Oh, I need to grow up?” Kevin scoffed, not liking how flustered and caught off-guard he was feeling. His knew his face was probably turning a bright shade of red by now. It had to be. “Are you actually being serious right now? You’re the one who acts like a child, Arnold, not me.”

“I’m afraid I have to respectfully disagree there, bud.”

“Oh, do you?” Kevin couldn’t even believe they were having this conversation. The answer as to who was the bigger baby between the two of them was quite obvious. “Because I seem to remember a certain twenty-eight-year-old eating so many goddamn churros at the street fair last month that you ended up puking all over my child on the Ferris Wheel. That was you, wasn’t it? Or how about the time you almost got arrested for swimming in the fountain at the park? Or the time you challenged yourself to eat an entire box of Oreos in under five minutes—and then did?”

“Oh, but you totally thought that was awesome at the time,” Arnold reminded him with a big toothy grin. Of course, his best friend was right. It had been a pretty miraculous feat of eating-ship, but Kevin wasn’t about to back down now. “And that’s totally not the same thing as being a guy about to push thirty who’s too afraid to buy a few itty bitty condoms. Not even close.”

“Okay, well,” Kevin stammered, trying to come up with another dig at Arnold. “Which one of us always ends up bringing the most useless crap home from the arcade at Chuck-E-Cheese, huh?
Better yet, what kind of ‘adult’,” he made air quotes with his hands as he said the word; “has his birthday party at Dave & Busters every single year? Here’s a hint: it isn’t Charlie and it isn’t Harrison and it sure as heck isn’t me, so—”

“Okay, buddy, you need to just calm down.” Arnold’s voice was low and soothing as he gripped onto Kevin’s shoulders.

“I am calm,” Kevin insisted, swatting Arnold’s hands away. “This is what calm looks like.”

“No,” Arnold said. “This is what about to have a heart attack looks like.”

Knowing Arnold was right, but not wanting to admit it, he ran a shaky hand through his hair and took in a deep breath. “See? I’m fine.” He gestured to himself as he exhaled. “I’m totally fine.”

“Another one,” Arnold said, referring to his breaths. Kevin obeyed, locking eyes with Arnold as he took in another breath and exhaled slowly. Pretty soon, he felt the tightness in his chest loosen up just a little. “There we go.”

“I’m fine, Arnold.” He swallowed something thick, and placed his trembling hands back on the cart. “I’m fine.” Maybe if he repeated it enough times, it would eventually become true.

“Good.” Arnold clapped a hand to the back of Kevin’s shoulder. “Now, you’re going to go up there and you’re going to buy those condoms without so much as a second thought, okay? You got this, buddy. I know you do.”

“Fine,” Kevin sighed, knowing damn well when he’s been defeated. It was completely pointless to argue with Arnold.

By the time they got to the cashier, however, Kevin did end up having second thoughts. As he placed the items onto the conveyor belt, he could feel his stomach beginning to knot up, his hands starting to shake again. It was just so embarrassing, and he’d been to this particular cashier countless times over the past few years—oftentimes, with Charlie in his arms—making the whole ordeal feel even more humiliating.

“They’re not for me, you know,” Kevin leaned forward and whispered to the cashier. He tilted his head towards Arnold, who was ahead of him, packing his own bags into his cart. “They’re for him.”

“Actually,” Arnold said, his voice sounding a tad too cheerful as he slung an arm over Kevin’s shoulders. “They’re for us.”

“What!” Kevin could feel the onset of rage boiling up inside of him. He smacked Arnold’s arm away and looked back at the cashier, mortified. “They are—they are not for us,” he spat, shooting Arnold his best dirty look. “He has a wife. And a kid. And a dog. We are not—we are not like that.”

The dead-eyed cashier didn’t look like she cared one way or another who the condoms were for and politely ushered for Kevin to move along and bag his own.

“I’m never going grocery shopping with you again,” Kevin announced, as they made their way to the car. “That was beyond embarrassing. I don’t even know how I’ll ever be able to set foot in there again.”

“Trust me, buddy,” Arnold chuckled and wrapped an arm around Kevin, leaning into his side as they walked. “You will, and you’ll be thanking me later—just you wait.”
By the time Kevin got home, his seething anger had simmered down to nothing more than a dull annoyance. He knew Arnold had meant well, of course. He always meant well. His intentions were never the problem—it was how he went about acting on them that constantly drove Kevin up a wall. Still, a tiny part of his sensibilities had to admit that maybe his best friend was right, after all. He’d learned from experience that Arnold Cunningham was usually right about these kinds of things. Letting out a tired sigh, he resigned to texting Arnold an apology later on, once he had a chance to think things through a little.

Dumping the contents of the grocery bags out onto the table, he watched with chagrin as the boxes of condoms and lubricant came tumbling out, alongside a roll of toilet paper and a tube of toothpaste. He snorted to himself, amused, as he picked up the box of lubricant. He still couldn’t believe Arnold had made him buy a triple-pack. He wasn’t even sure he’d be needing one bottle of this stuff, let alone three, but doing things loudly and in abundance had always been Arnold’s way.

As he set down the box of lubricant and picked up the condoms, it hit him rather suddenly that he’d never actually had to wear one of these things before.

No, Kevin Price was twenty-eight-years-old and still practically a virgin; a man whose total sum of sexual experience consisted of: masturbation, a few inexperienced handjobs (courtesy of a very eager twenty-year-old Connor), and that one night of drunken something back at BYU, with Marjorie. It was an experience he didn’t even remember having, the night Charlie was conceived—one that Connor was constantly trying to convince him was most likely not consensual.

He knew how pathetic it all sounded, how pathetic he sounded. Having sex with Connor was something that should have happened ages ago. It was something that would have been happening now, had everything else in his life not gone completely to shit. But it did, and it had, and now here he was, staring down at a box of condoms with the harsh realization that he’d never actually had to wear one before.

He thought about a lot of things as he stood there, turning the box over in his hands. He thought about Dr. Nathan and Marjorie and his parents and all of the little things that had happened, sequentially, over the course of his life, leading him to this very moment. He thought about Connor and how open and expressive their relationship used to be, back in Uganda, before they were forced to return home, and about all of the things he hoped their relationship would be, now, the second time around.

As Kevin carefully placed the items back into the bag (three bags, actually, just to make completely sure they were concealed), he let his mind drift back to the first time Connor had ever touched him down there, the first time Kevin had ever let another human person touch him in that way. He had been lying in bed next to Connor, sweating to death in the dank Ugandan heat, under a scratchy blanket. They were making out, per usual, when the back of Connor’s hand accidentally grazed over the hard bump in his pants. Kevin let out a soft moan at the touch, the kind that was embarrassing and accidental and made his cheeks flush all kinds of red. He hadn’t meant for the sound to slip out, but it just sort of did. Connor had always had that effect on him, whenever they got a bit too close.

He could remember how wide Connor’s eyes had gone, seeming enthralled by his newfound ability to make sounds come out of Kevin’s mouth. His expression then turned mischievous and just a little bit smug, as he leaned down and whispered a soft is it okay? into Kevin’s ear. Not even a second after Kevin nodded, he felt a warm hand slip down the front of his pants, gripping him tight, and then —oh God. The feeling was absolutely incredible; miraculous, even. Up until that point, Kevin had only been touched by the skin of his own palm, but this—well, this felt entirely different. It felt so
much better than doing it himself, shamefully and secretive and alone. When Connor did it, it didn’t feel shameful or lonely. It felt a thousand times better than anything he could have ever imagined. He felt, everything, a thousand times more.

They touched each other like that every once in a while, in the privacy of their tiny, hot room. They’d cuddle close in Kevin’s twin bed whenever Arnold slept over at the Hatimbis’, making out and moaning and letting their hands wander. Sometimes it happened in the bed, sometimes in the shower. Sometimes, it even happened in the back of their broken down toolshed. But it was always, always incredible. Always. They never did venture beyond touching, though, because Kevin was still quite shy back then, still plagued by years and years of Church doctrine, still unable to keep the feelings of guilt and shame from seeping in whenever he spilled out over Connor’s fist. But, much to Kevin’s relief, their innocent little forays into sex seemed to be enough for Connor, at the time.

Then they came back home, to America, and everything changed. They never did get to graduate beyond touching because by the time Kevin was finally ready for more, it was already too late. He had already gotten beaten down, humiliated, reprimanded, and sent off to conversion therapy. His life had already started to unravel before his own eyes, his mind turning dark and depressed and scared, and nothing was ever really the same again, after that.

And Connor knew that, now. He knew that now, which was why he was being so careful and patient with Kevin. It was why he wasn’t hounding him or pressuring him or making him feel guilty about it. But Connor shouldn’t have had to wait this long, Kevin thought; he shouldn’t have to be this patient. Kevin didn’t want their new relationship to mimic how it used to be. He wanted it to be better than it used to be. Because Connor deserved that. He deserved Kevin at his very best; deserved to be touched and admired and satisfied and happy.

And Kevin wanted that, too. He wanted it more than he’d ever wanted anything else in his whole life. He especially wanted it whenever Connor would smile that cheeky little smile of his, before reaching up to play with the fringe of Kevin’s hair, gently brushing it out of his eyes, or whenever he’d lean in and kiss Kevin, soft and slow, as though they had all the time in the world to spare, sliding his tongue into Kevin's mouth with practiced ease. Whenever Connor did any of those things, all of the blood in Kevin’s body would rush instantly to his groin, turning him hard within seconds. It didn’t take very much to turn him on, not when Connor was in his arms, laughing or smiling or purring or doing anything really.

It was honestly embarrassing how little it took, and it was starting to happen nearly every time they went out on a date. Connor would laugh at something Kevin had just said during dinner, twirling a piece of hair around his finger in that way he always did, making Kevin’s erection press so far into the material of his pants that it physically hurt. Then later on in the evening, after Connor had gone home, Kevin would shamefully take care of it himself, spilling out into a towel beneath his covers or alone in the shower, where the running water could muffle out any unwanted sounds. He’d feel ashamed afterwards, watching the remnants of the act get sucked down the drain. It was sad, lonely, and depressing, and he couldn’t help but remember how it used to feel whenever Connor had touched him like that, and how it had always felt so much better than this. This was lonely, and pathetic. What he wanted was so much more than this.

But there was still this horrible, nagging part of Kevin’s brain that just wouldn’t turn off, no matter how hard he tried. It was the part of his brain that kept on insisting that these thoughts about Connor were disgusting, impure, vile. The voice would whisper into his ear, dark and unrelenting, whenever Connor turned him on, talking of God and guilt and his parents and Hell. It would raise its voice to a near-shout the closer Kevin came to making a move, sex-wise, pushing it’s way so far down into his psyche that it sometimes felt impossible to escape.
There was another part of his brain, however—the calmer, more logical part, the one he’s been trying to listen to more and more these days. That voice was soothing, telling him to relax, and not to worry so much. It would tell him that feeling this way was okay, that being attracted to Connor was okay, that it was natural, that it was normal, that it was okay to want to be with a man, that it was okay to want to be with Connor. Kevin typically heard that part of his brain speak in Connor’s voice, probably because his voice always sounded so gentle and strong and was good at instilling within Kevin, a feeling of confidence.

Nodding to himself in finality, he tied up the bag of supplies and placed them underneath the sink in the bathroom, all the way in the back. Maybe they’d use them that night, if the mood was right. Maybe they wouldn’t. Either way, he vowed to try his best to just relax, to not worry about it so much. If it happened, it happened. If it didn’t, then there was always next time.

He felt excited, and just a little bit nervous, as he buttoned up his khakis and ran a gel-laced comb through his hair. As he gave himself a once-over in the mirror, he found himself silently hoping that the mood would end up feeling right, after all. Not that he’d ever admit that to Arnold, though. It was true that he was older now, and maybe a tad more mature, but if there was one thing Kevin Price still hated, it was being wrong.

So far, Kevin and Connor’s eighth official date (yes, Connor McKinley was most certainly keeping count) was turning out to be a beautiful success.

The mood was warm and cozy, filled with gentle teasing and flirting and laughter. Their little homemade pizzas were baking in the oven, Connor had a glass of chilled white wine in his hand, and Kevin—well, Kevin was wearing perhaps the corniest apron Connor McKinley had ever seen in his life. It was dark blue, to match his shirt, and had the words This Dad is Flipping Awesome written across the front, equipped with the image of a spatula underneath. It was adorable and ridiculously silly and just so very Kevin, that it was nearly impossible for Connor not to smile every time he looked at it. Then again, Connor had expected nothing less from the man he was happy to once again call his boyfriend. Not that they’d actually had the talk about labels or anything yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time before they did. They’d been growing closer over these past few weeks, reconnecting with each other, falling in love again, and it was all happening so much faster than Connor could have ever thought possible.

Things were starting to feel more comfortable between them now, more familiar. Kissing no longer seemed to induce nervousness or anxiety on Kevin’s part, even when their tongues swirled together or Connor’s hands wandered up the back of his shirt or over his bottom. Casual touches and displays of affection were becoming more routine and commonplace with each passing day. Kevin was still hesitant about expressing them in public, of course, unless it was in the darkness of a movie theater or a planetarium or a secluded corner of a restaurant; and even then, he was careful not to take it too far. It was enough to hurt Connor’s feelings, sometimes, but he was trying not to dwell on the negatives. At least when they were alone like this, Kevin’s touches were constant and reassuring, always leaving Connor feeling drunk and blissful and happy.

Their communication felt more open now, too, despite the secrecy of their relationship from the outside world. They texted and called each other nearly every night, right before going to sleep. It was usually just a simple text or two, to wish each other goodnight, but each and every one of those little texts, no matter how short or seemingly insignificant, felt incredibly important to Connor. He waited for them to come, got excited when they did, and saved them all as though they were
precious. The little messages they exchanged were affectionate and loving, typically accompanied by lots of pink hearts and kissy faces, things like that. Connor knew it was cheesy, but he honestly didn’t care. He was in love, which meant he had a free pass to be as cheesy as he wanted to be.

Kevin sometimes sent silly selfies of himself with ragged, messy bedhead and droopy eyelids, typically holding up his midnight cup of coffee, raised in a cheers. He did so simply because he knew it drove Connor bonkers. No wonder you have insomnia, Connor was constantly badgering him; you drink coffee all night long. Every once in a while, Kevin would snap an adorable photo of Charlie, usually after she had just fallen asleep on the couch, snuggled up against Kevin’s side, a bit of drool rolling down her chubby chin. He always sent those accompanied by heart eyes and a funny caption, such as the girl who never gets tired.

There were also the occasional late night video chats. Those were Connor’s absolute favorites, mainly because it gave him the opportunity to get a little flirty. He’d typically lay down on his mother’s couch, iPad propped up on the coffee table, in what he hoped was a rather alluring position. He would cover himself in nothing but an oversized sweatshirt and underwear, the tight kind that hugged his hips, laying at an angle that best showed off the curviness of his thighs. It was a sight that never failed to make Kevin blush, and Connor practically lived for making Kevin blush. He always had, and probably always would. It wasn’t his fault that Kevin Price’s attractiveness managed to increase ten-fold whenever his cheeks turned bright red and his hands got all nervous and fidgety.

They still weren’t having sex with each other yet, was the only thing, and Connor was trying his hardest to be okay with that. He was succeeding at this endeavor, mostly, though there were certainly times when he’d have to remind himself not to take their make-out sessions too far. He knew Kevin's story, knew why he was so hesitant and nervous about sex, and so he had vowed to himself to be as patient as possible. It hurt a little, sure, and he sometimes found himself impossibly hot and bothered, but he also knew that Kevin would come around, eventually. In the meantime, they had an agreement: Kevin would let him know once he was ready, and they’d try. Until then, Connor wasn’t to pressure him about it.

Despite the lack of sex, these past few weeks with Kevin still felt like something out of a dream. Being together again was everything he’d hoped it would be, and more. It was the beginning. It was the beginning, all over again. And this beginning was more special and important than any other beginning Connor’s ever had because this beginning was with Kevin. And Connor wanted nothing more than to soak up every last ounce of this beginning—of this very important beginning with Kevin—because he hoped, and prayed, that it would be his last.

“Wanna chop the onions?” Kevin asked, gesturing to the pile of onions on the cutting board.

Connor was propped up on the countertop, glass of wine in hand, enjoying the spectacle in front of him. Kevin wasn’t nearly as good a cook as he claimed to be, not even by a longshot, but Connor would never tell him that. No, he was more than content to sit there, smiling to himself, as he watched Kevin get flustered and accidentally burn things.

“I’m actually more of a silent participant when it comes to the whole cooking thing,” Connor declined the offer of onion chopping, before taking a sip from his wine glass. “Kind of like Vanna White. I’m like the Vanna White of cooking.” Kevin looked confused at this. “Okay, here, I’ll show you. Do a cooking thing.”

The other man made a face, before reluctantly slicing into a tomato. “How’s that?”

“Ta-da!” Connor gestured wildly to the sliced tomato, a bit of wine spilling over the top of his glass. Kevin raised a curious eyebrow. “See?” Connor grinned. “Just like Vanna White.”
“Vanna White?” Kevin scrunched his face, as though he had no idea who Connor was talking about. “Isn’t she on Jeopardy or something?”

Connor just sighed. “Seriously?”

“Yes?” Kevin wrinkled his brow. “I could’ve sworn she was on Jeopardy.”

Kevin Price was hopeless. He would never make it as a proper New York City gay, that was for sure. But Connor supposed they would have plenty of time to work on that, before he eventually convinced Kevin to move with him to the city.

“She’s been the co-host of Wheel of Fortune for over thirty years now, Kevin.” Connor rolled his eyes, and took another sip. “Don’t you ever watch TV?”

“I have a job, remember?” Kevin smirked, pulling himself away from the cutting board just so he could step in-between Connor’s legs, placing his hands on either side of his hips. “And a child. I’m a very busy man, you know.”

“Well, aren’t you lucky,” Connor snorted, and took another sip. “It seems like all I do these days is lay on the couch and watch TV.” He looked down at his belly and squeezed the bit of softness in the front. “I’m getting fat, too. I really need to lay off the chips. And the pizza. And the wine. But, it’s okay.” He laughed. “It’s okay, because at least I’m caught up with the *Real Housewives of New Jersey*, right?”

Kevin’s eyes flickered with a kind of sadness before moving his hands up to graze over Connor’s sides. He looked like he felt guilty about something, making Connor’s mood instantly fall.

“You’re not fat,” Kevin said, as he continued to caress his sides. “Not even a little bit.” He brought Connor’s hand up to his lips and kissed it, looking as though he wanted to say more on the matter, but wasn’t quite sure how to say it.

“I’m sorry.” Connor shook his head with a sad laugh. “I didn’t mean to kill the mood or anything, I’m actually enjoying all of this free time. My mother had a great life insurance policy and a hefty 401k. I should be thankful for that. I’ve spent the past five years running around from audition to audition. It’s nice to not have to do that for a while.” He thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. “I mean, living in that empty house is a little depressing and I miss New York City and my friends, but other than that, I’m doing just fine.” He paused a moment and leaned in closer to Kevin, brushing their noses together. “It’s been worth it, trust me.”

*Because of you,* was what he wanted to add, but he didn’t. He didn’t want to come across as completely head over heels and pathetic, even if it was the truth.

Well, the *actual* truth was that, deep down, he wasn’t happy here at all. Not really, anyway; not unless he was here—here, wrapped up in Kevin’s arms, being held and touched and cherished and kissed. But he was doing *okay* otherwise, for the most part, even when he wasn’t physically with Kevin. Chris called it *being in denial of the truth,* but Connor just kept on telling him exactly where he could shove it. He knew his best friend was only concerned about him, of course. That much was clear. It had always been clear. But he just didn’t *understand* Kevin the way Connor did. That had always been the problem.

“Have you looked at any of the auditions I sent you?” Kevin asked softly, his hands still stroking Connor’s sides. They moved so gently, up and down and up again, filling Connor’s tummy with a litany of butterflies. “The ones here in Salt Lake City.”
“I did,” Connor sighed, setting down his wine glass in favor of circling his arms around Kevin’s neck. He kissed the tip of his nose, making Kevin beam like a dummy. “But those places are filled with sexually repressed Mormons who would rather spend their time lecturing me on why I should re-join the Church than actual acting. So, thanks, but no thanks, I think I’m good.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Kevin said, placing a kiss to Connor’s cheek. “You shouldn’t knock it if you haven’t tried it.”

“I’ve spent enough time at those theaters as a kid to know exactly what kinds of people work there, and I don’t have any interest in being surrounded by Mormons again, especially not the kind I used to be, if you know what I mean.” He leaned in and kissed Kevin again, just because he could. “They’re insufferable and sad.” The look in Kevin’s eyes quickly reminded Connor that, on the books at least, Kevin Price was still very much a Mormon—even if he wasn’t quite as sexually repressed as he used to be. “No offense.”

“None taken.” Kevin gave him a weak smile, then leaned in to press a kiss to Connor’s lips. “Now, about those onions—“

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Connor smiled, closing his eyes as Kevin’s lips slowly made their way down his neck. This was bad—very bad—because neck kisses were Connor’s ultimate weakness, especially when Kevin’s lips were the ones doing the kissing. He silently wondered if Kevin knew that, or if he was just hazarding a guess. Connor’s grumbling over the onions soon deteriorated into a bout of giggles, the stubble of Kevin’s chin tickling at his neck, before melting into a series of low moans. The volume of his moans increased with the intensity of the kissing, the harder Kevin’s fingers dug into his sides, making Connor fall apart at the seams in the best possible way. Kevin was bound to notice the bulge in his pants once they parted, but he didn’t really care. Kevin hands were gripping at his sides, his lips were on his neck, and he was starting to feel all lightheaded and hot and dizzy.

“But, I don’t wanna chop onions,” he murmured into the fluff of Kevin’s hair, the softness of the strands making his insides melt. He tried his hardest to protest the feeling, to not give in to the touch, but a moan still escaped his mouth, regardless, his fingers digging deeper into the scruff of Kevin’s neck. “Can’t I just drink my wine and look pretty? Please? I’m really good at doing that.”


“But you’re not playing fair.” He was trying his hardest not to moan again, but the softness of Kevin’s hair was brushing up against his cheek and his lips were back where they belonged, and it just felt so good. The thought of Kevin’s lips leaving a mark on his neck sent a little thrill down Connor’s spine. “This is bribery, you know. Coercion. You could get arrested for this.”

Kevin smiled into his neck. “Is it working?”


As it turned out, Connor was quite terrible at chopping onions. So terrible, in fact, that he managed to nick his thumb not once, but twice, after only a few minutes alone with the knife. He spent a while fretting over his throbbing thumb, listening as Kevin annoyingly insisted he would be just fine. Not wanting to fight, or get blood in the salad, Kevin offered to finish up dinner while Connor left to tend
Connor made his way to the only bathroom in the house, in search of the first aid kit that was allegedly under the sink. Kevin’s bathroom was rather small and cramped, tucked in-between the kitchen and a closet. Thumb still throbbing, Connor bent down and rummaged around the cabinet until he found the kit. As he pulled it out of the too-small cabinet, however, a few other items fell out along with it—a box of Q-Tips, an old, rusty electric shaver, and a plastic grocery bag, triple-layered and tightly tied up.

Curious, he very carefully opened up the bag. Inside, he found two boxes of condoms, three different varieties of flavored lube, and a receipt. Looking closely at the receipt, he could see it contained most of the items they were making for dinner that night. Sure enough, the date written along the bottom of the receipt confirmed his suspicion—it was from today.

Bloody thumb entirely forgotten, Connor let out a deep sigh as he leaned back against the tub. Kevin was clearly contemplating making a move, sex-wise—and most likely that evening. At least, that was how it appeared, judging by the evidence. It was a thought that filled Connor with such warmth and joy and happy excitement, but what confused him the most was that the items were so tightly wrapped up and hidden beneath the sink, as though he wasn’t planning on using them for a very long time. He wanted to ask Kevin about it. He wanted their relationship to be open and honest, free of shame and void of secrets, but he also didn’t want Kevin to feel pressured. He knew that even asking him about the items might make him feel pressured. That was just how Kevin was when it came to matters of sex—nervous, insecure, and easily pressured.

After taking care of his thumb and wrapping it up in a bandage, he carefully placed the items into the bag and put them back where he’d found them, tucked away in the far corner of the cabinet.

“Hey, you.” Connor strolled back into the kitchen, circling his arms around Kevin’s waist from behind. Four pots were bubbling over on the stove, being tended to by a very anxious-looking Kevin, visibly struggling to keep up with all the moving parts of their three-course meal. “Want some help?”

Kevin turned around to face Connor, his face glossy from sweat and his adorable apron, now covered in various food remnants. Despite how stressed out he seemed, he still managed a smile as soon as he met Connor’s eyes.

“Nah, I got it.” Kevin turned back to the stove, lowering the flames on each of the pots. “Dinner should be ready soon. How’s your thumb?”

“My thumb?” Connor paused a moment, confused. “Oh, right, my thumb.” He let out a nervous laugh, shaking his head as he glanced down at his bandaged hand. He’d honestly forgotten all about it, in favor of thinking about other matters. “It feels a lot better now, thanks.”

“See?” Kevin grinned, and proceeded to bop Connor on the head with a *Star Wars* oven mitt. “Told you it wasn’t that bad.”

“You were right.” Connor reached up and rested a hand against Kevin’s cheek, while looping the other around his waist. “Could we talk for a minute? I need to talk to you about something.”

“Right now?” Kevin asked, glancing behind him at the overflowing pots and pans on the stove. “I’m
“Yes, now.” Connor tilted Kevin’s head, so he’d turn back around and meet his eyes. “Right now. It’s important.”

He could feel Kevin’s body tense up in his arms. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course.” Connor softened his tone, to try and make Kevin feel at ease. He put on his most reassuring smile. “The wine is great, dinner smells delicious, and your apron is very cute.” He poked the silly spatula graphic on Kevin’s apron. “Everything is just... wonderful.”

Kevin cocked his head to the side, as though he didn’t quite believe Connor’s words. “Even with the thumb incident?”

Connor chuckled, as he pulled Kevin closer. “Even with the thumb incident.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

Connor was honestly worried about even broaching the subject of sex with Kevin. He knew how sensitive he could be about these kinds of things, how easily pressured he could get. Kevin may have been twenty-eight-years-old in age, but Connor knew his sexual experience was more akin to that of a nineteen-year-old. It wasn’t his fault. Connor knew that, now, and he didn’t want to make him nervous.

“Connor?” Looking even more worried now, Kevin ran gentle fingers over his knuckles. “What is it?”

“I found a box of condoms and stuff under the sink, while I was looking for the first aid kit,” he revealed with a hard swallow, watching Kevin’s face closely. “And I couldn’t help but notice that the receipt was from today.” As expected, he felt Kevin’s body go stiff almost instantly. “Don’t worry,” Connor soothed, reaching up to run his fingers through the fringe of Kevin’s hair. “Just relax, okay?”

“I am relaxed,” Kevin insisted, but his face was already showing signs of panic, signaling to Connor that he was anything but.

“Relax,” Connor repeated, moving his hand down to stroke Kevin’s cheek. “I just wanted to know if you were you thinking we might try and have sex tonight?” He asked the question gently, and with the most amount of tact he could possibly muster. He paused again, to try and let Kevin speak, but he didn’t. Instead, he just stood there, his face gradually losing color. “I mean, when I saw the date on the receipt, I just sort of assumed...,” he trailed off, not really sure what else to say. “I’m not trying to pressure you, Kevin. I swear to God, I’m not. I just wanted to know, that’s all.”

“I forgot those things were even in there,” Kevin eventually mustered out, running a shaky hand through his hair. He honestly looked as though he might vomit. “I don’t know what I’m doing, okay? I don’t know if I’m ready or not. I tied those things up in three different bags so no one would ever find them, and then you found them.” He closed his eyes, and let out a deep breath. “God, I suck at this.”

“No, you don’t,” Connor assured, running a hand down Kevin’s back. “Everything’s okay. It just surprised me a little, that’s all. But in a good way.” He smiled, warm and comforting. “In a very, very good way.” He felt a bit of heat rise to his cheeks, embarrassed over his own eagerness. “It’s just... you told me you needed more time, that’s all. The last time we talked about it.”

“I don’t know what I need.” Kevin swallowed hard and let out a shaky breath. “I don’t know what I
want.” He closed his eyes and took in another breath. “That stuff—it’s all because of Arnold. He’s the one who made me buy it today, even though I told him I wasn’t—,” he lost his words to a panicked gasp. “But, Arnold—he insisted.”

“Arnold?” Connor asked, still rubbing Kevin’s back, hoping it would help to calm him down. “What’s Arnold got to do with our sex life?” Upon thinking on it for a moment, he decided to make a joke, just to try and break the tension a little. “He’s not invited, is he? Because I might have a teeny little problem with that.”

The joke made Kevin snort, followed by an eruption of laughter. It was a sound that never failed to make Connor’s grin stretch so wide it practically hurt. He’d always thought that Kevin’s laugh—his genuine, honest laugh—was the most beautiful sound in the world.

Connor shrugged, trying to stifle a laugh. “Look, for a second there, I thought you might have been suggesting a threesome.”

“Come on, don’t be gross.” Kevin gave him a playful shove, to try and chide him, but his eyes were still smiling. “No, Arnold came grocery shopping with me today and he—well, he kept trying to convince me that I needed—that we needed—that I couldn’t leave the store without—.” He looked down to the floor, fidgeting nervously with his hands. “You know, just in case we ended up needing that stuff tonight, or something, even though I told him a thousand times that we wouldn’t, but now, I don’t know. I think I might want to, but I’m just—I’m really nervous.” He swallowed hard, and looked down to the floor. “I know that sounds stupid. I know it does. I’m twenty-eight years old. I know I shouldn’t feel this way. I know I don’t need to be this nervous, because you love me. I know that. But, I am.”

“It’s okay.” Connor lifted Kevin’s chin up with his hand, so that their eyes could meet. Oh, and his eyes. There was just something so unbelievably endearing about Kevin Price whenever he got all shy and worked up and unsure of himself like this. It was a look Connor didn’t get a chance to see on him very often, save for small, sparing intimate moments like these. “It’s okay,” he repeated, just in case.

“He likes to meddle in my business sometimes,” Kevin explained, referring to Arnold. “It makes him feel like he’s helping me or something… so I let him.”

But even Kevin looked as though he didn’t really believe it. The stupid comment made Connor’s eyes roll and pretty soon, he felt a pair of hands wrap around his middle, warm and tender.

“So, what do you think?” Kevin asked, nervously, pulling their bodies closer together. “Do you want to, um—you know, after dinner?”

Kevin’s question wouldn’t have made sense to anyone else, but Connor understood exactly what he meant. And the truth was: Connor had been looking forward to hearing those words fall out of Kevin’s mouth for eight years now, eight long years, and now that he was finally saying them, Connor found he had to decline.

Kevin’s eyes widened in shock, as though he had not been expecting that answer. He was probably expecting Connor to start jumping up and down with an eager yes, yes, yes, oh, God, yes! Connor knew he was a little transparent in his desires, certainly, but was he really that transparent?

“I don’t understand.” Kevin shifted his weight from one foot to the other, seeming suddenly insecure. “Why can’t you? Do you not want to?”

Stupid Kevin. Of course he wanted to. There was nothing in the world he wanted more.

“Of course I want to.” He rolled his eyes, smiling, and cupped Kevin’s cheek in his hand. “Idiot.”

“Then I don’t understand.” He placed a hand over Connor’s. His palms felt nervous and sweaty. “What’s the problem?”

“I told you to let me know once you were ready, remember?” It took a moment, but Kevin eventually nodded. “But you didn’t, which is why I wasn’t exactly prepared to do it tonight. I haven’t been, um—,” he hesitated, not entirely sure how to explain this to Kevin. It was a rather unpleasant topic involving anal sex and the matter of cleanliness. An embarrassing topic, yes, but a real one, nonetheless. “I haven’t been preparing myself to do that because I thought you weren’t ready yet.” He paused, to try and let this new information sink in. “Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

Kevin didn’t seem to understand. He just stood there for a moment, looking awfully confused. Connor found himself cracking a small smile at his expense. He searched Kevin’s eyes for a little while longer, trying to gauge whether or not he might’ve understood just a little bit of what he was trying to get at, or if he really was just that out of the loop.

“I’ll make sure I’m ready next time, okay?” Connor gently explained, running a thumb over the stubble of Kevin’s chin. “I’ll prepare myself.” He paused, to try and let the words sink in. “Prepare my body.”

After a moment of contemplation, Kevin slowly nodded. “Okay.” He swallowed hard, nervous hands scrubbing over the legs of his khakis. “I’m not sure I get it entirely, but I trust you. Next time. We’ll do it next time.”

Connor looked down in a weak attempt to hide both his grin and his blush. “I’ll, um—I’ll explain it to you later, okay? I promise.” He leaned in and gave Kevin a soft peck on the cheek. “Right now, you have a Kevin special to finish.”

A few hours later, they were both laying on the couch in the living room, watching a movie by the fireplace. Kevin’s favorite fuzzy blanket was draped over top of them, Connor’s head resting comfortably in Kevin’s lap, their hands entwined atop Connor’s belly. Kevin had dimmed the lights nearly all the way down, to try and set a romantic mood. He liked the way the glow of firelight danced across the paleness of Connor’s skin.

Connor seemed to be completely engrossed in whatever movie they were watching, his eyes glued to the screen for the past hour, absentmindedly shoveling popcorn into his mouth. Every once in a while, he’d gasp at something that happened in the film or ask Kevin if he saw that, but Kevin couldn’t even remember what the movie was called, let alone what was going on inside of it. He much preferred gazing down at Connor in his lap, lazily brushing loose strands of hair out of his eyes...
and picking popcorn remnants off his chin, all while admiring his amazing luck.

Mid-way through the film, one of the important characters must have gotten shot or something, because Kevin heard loud bang, followed by a surprised screech from Connor.

“Oh my God,” Connor gasped. “I can’t believe they shot him. Did you see that?”

“I love you,” came Kevin’s soft reply, completely unrelated to the topic at hand. He was still gazing down at the man in his lap, lost in some kind of daze, fingers gently carding through reddish strands of hair.

With that, Connor’s eyes moved away from the screen in favor of looking up into Kevin’s. He spent a moment searching Kevin’s eyes, until the corner of his lips curved ever-so-slightly upwards. “That’s the first time you’ve said that to me since the letter.”

“I believe the correct response should have been ‘I love you, too’,” Kevin smirked. “Try again.”

“Oh, sorry.” Connor smiled, curling his body a little closer to Kevin's chest. “I love you, too.”

“That’s better.” Kevin glanced up at the television screen, then back down at Connor. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt the movie. We can rewind it if you want.”

Connor reached up, wordlessly gripping the back of Kevin’s neck and pulling him down into a kiss. The lips against his own were soft and plump, sweetened by the faintest hints of buttery popcorn and mint chocolate ice cream. Like always, it didn’t take much for Kevin to turn instantly hard. He placed a hand atop the curve in Connor’s waist, giving the soft skin a gentle squeeze. A ripple of disappointment cascaded through his body as he recalled Connor’s words from earlier in the evening: *I didn’t prepare myself to do it tonight. Next time, okay?*

It was a shame, because for the first time in a really long time, Kevin finally felt ready, and the mood felt right, too. Everything felt calm and peaceful and romantic and he would have loved nothing more than to finally give himself fully to Connor, make him squirm and moan and cry out his name —

“I have an idea,” Connor whispered, smiling into Kevin’s mouth. It was a mischievous kind of smile, the kind he had back in Uganda the first time they ever—wait, was *that* what Connor had in mind? He didn’t want to ask though. Would that be weird? To ask? It would definitely be weird, Kevin decided. He couldn’t ask for *that*.

But, pretty soon, Connor’s intentions were made crystal clear, and Kevin felt all the blood in his body split between his cheeks and his groin.

“Connor,” was all Kevin could say, raspy and hoarse, once he felt the man in his lap start to unbutton the front of his pants. “I thought you said we couldn’t—oh.”

“Is it okay?” Connor asked, resting a gentle hand atop Kevin’s open zipper. Kevin nodded yes, knowing full well how doepy and dreamy his expression probably looked, but he didn’t really care. Connor was here, in his arms, once again, and everything felt right.

And just as it had happened years before, Connor McKinley didn’t waste any time; his hands were already nudging Kevin’s boxers down over his thighs, revealing his embarrassingly hard erection. The moment Connor touched him, Kevin's eyes seemed to close on their own volition, an accidental groan escaping his throat. He leaned back against the couch, trying to push away all of those negative thoughts that were beginning to bombard his mind, in favor of focusing on the feeling. It was the first time Kevin had been touched like this in over six years, but that damned annoying part
of his brain just kept on trying to ruin it, kept on trying to make him feel guilt instead of bliss. But
then Connor’s soft voice was whispering gentle words into his ear, things like it’s okay and I love
you, and he quickly relaxed into the touch, the darker voice drifting to the back of his mind like the
memory of a fading dream.

Upon realizing that he desperately wanted to look into Connor’s eyes during this, despite how
embarrassed it was making him feel, he opened his eyes part-way. He felt nervous and he knew his
face was probably blushing beet red, but he let himself lock eyes with Connor anyway, enjoying
how determined and mesmerized the man in his lap looked as he stroked him. Connor’s hand felt so
warm. Kevin had always liked that about his hands. His eyes were warm, too, and lidded, gazing
down at Kevin as though he were the most precious thing in the universe, as though there was
nothing more important than this. Kevin knew that love was not a tangible thing that one could touch
with their hands, but, sometimes, he swore he could physically see the love in Connor’s eyes. He
hoped Connor could see the same in his, as well; that he made his feelings clear enough. Sometimes
it worried him, that Connor might not actually understand how much he loved him, because of
everything that had happened, and all of the mistakes he’d made.

It didn’t take very long for Kevin to finish; maybe three or four minutes, tops. As his body betrayed
him and he came all over his boyfriend’s fist, he let out a low moan, gripping tightly to the back of
Connor’s neck. His mind whited out for a moment or two, his body tensing up, and he needed to
hold onto Connor for support until he was completely finished. His body soon went limp after that,
like a puddle of melted goo, as he heaved in a deep breath. He hadn’t even realized he wasn’t taking
in enough air until he found himself gasping for it, desperately, the feeling of sweat trickling down
his forehead reminding him just how flushed and warm he was. Before he could even murmur a
sleepy thank you into Connor’s ear, he found his face was already being covered with kisses.
Connor’s kisses. They felt extra soft against his skin, too, sensitive and tingling in the afterglow.

He found himself lost in a daze for a while after that, feeling completely spent and content. He held
Connor close to him, his arms wrapped tightly around his waist; but, no matter how close he tried to
pull him, it would never feel like enough. His face was pressed deep into Connor’s neck, where he
kept on whispering thank you and I love you over and over again. He felt safe like this, and warm,
and he couldn’t even believe he’d been living without this for so many years.

In his fuzzy, content state, he completely forgot to return the favor to Connor. It wasn’t intentional or
anything, it was just that Connor didn’t ask him to, and they soon fell asleep like that, on the couch,
wrapped up in each other’s arms. He thought about returning the favor the following morning, when
they woke up sleepily, the TV still on and Kevin’s pants down by his ankles, but he couldn’t. He
needed to shower and pick up Charlie in time for Church. His mother and father would fry him if he
was late to Church. But that was okay, he thought, as he nudged Connor awake at only eight o’clock
in the morning—he would have plenty of time to return the favor, later on.

“This place is, um—,” Kevin paused, as he gazed around at their surroundings. “Well, it’s nice.” He
took a moment to note the wood paneling and outdated furniture that looked to be straight out of the
1970s. “I mean, I guess.”

They were in The Sun Trapp, which was not only Connor’s favorite gay bar in Salt Lake City, but
apparently also one of the diviest dive bars in all of Utah. It was where mediocre karaoke, cheap
drinks, and all-you-can-eat tacos were on the menu for the evening.
“It’s a shithole,” Connor corrected him, as he hopped up on one of the barstools and patted the seat next to him. “You don’t have to be polite about it.”

“Oh, good.”

“Ginger ale?” Connor asked, as Kevin took a seat next to him.

“Oh, um, no,” Kevin said, and cleared his throat. “I’ll actually have whatever you’re having.”

Connor’s eyes widened just a little at Kevin’s answer. “A margarita?”

“Yeah,” Kevin nodded, nervously scrubbing his palms over his pants. “I’ll have a margarita.”

Connor looked curious at Kevin's drink choice, but just nodded and turned to flag down the bartender.

Connor had every reason to be surprised. considering Kevin didn’t usually drink alcohol, and especially not hard liquor, but tonight happened to be a very special night—tonight was going to be the night.

Sex. They were going to have sex.

All of the pieces were in place: Charlie was staying at his mom and dad’s for the night, to help his parents and siblings put up the Christmas tree and decorations, leaving Kevin with an empty house. It was the perfect recipe for a fun night out together—the perfect recipe for sex. Kevin usually joined his family for their annual decorating spree, but, this year, he lied and told them he needed to “work all weekend”. In truth, he wanted to take advantage of the empty house, in order to finally make love to his boyfriend. Despite everything he’d been through, there was honestly nothing he wanted more. He just didn’t want to mess anything up, that’s all. He didn’t want to come off as inexperienced or awkward or weird or just plain old wrong. Just like their first date and first kiss—he wanted their first time to be absolutely perfect. It was a tall order, considering he’s never actually done it before, so he figured maybe a drink or two might help to calm his nerves, relax him, get him in the mood.

“Let me guess,” the bartender said to Connor, as he leaned across the bar with a smile. “Margarita on the rocks with salt, and go just a little bit heavy on the tequila.”

“Make that two margaritas on the rocks with salt,” Connor smiled, flashing a five-dollar bill around his fingers. He gestured to Kevin. “I have a date.”

The man—Mark, judging by his name tag—seemed to know Connor quite well, and looked rather surprised at the mention of him having a date.

Once he left to fetch their drinks, Connor dropped the flirty smile and turned back to Kevin, looping his arms around Kevin’s neck and brushing their noses together.

“You could’ve gotten a ginger ale, you know. I wouldn’t have made fun of you for it.”

“That is such a lie.” Kevin smirked. “You made fun of me the last time we did this.”

Connor rolled his eyes. “Okay, yes, but that doesn’t count. We were still mad at each other, remember?” But before Kevin could answer, Connor was already pressing their lips together in a soft, reassuring kiss. At least, it should have felt reassuring, but the moment Connor’s lips met his own, Kevin felt himself jerk away, almost on instinct. They were in public, for goodness sakes—people could see them here.
“Don’t do that,” Kevin whispered, hotly, into Connor’s mouth, and pushed him back. “Not—not in public.”

“Kevin,” Connor said, gently, and with a surprising amount of tact. “This is a gay bar, remember? This is where gay people go to be gay. You don’t need to worry about that here. This is a safe place.”

“Right.” Kevin let out a sigh of relief, chuckling a little at his own silliness. "Right, I knew that. I just... forgot for a second.” He gazed into Connor’s eyes for a moment, desperately wanting to pull him into another kiss. His face must have betrayed his feelings, because Connor answered his silent plea without being asked.

“You can kiss me here, Kevin, and no one will even think twice about it,” Connor assured him, before sealing that promise with a kiss.

“I know,” Kevin whispered into his mouth, pulling back just a little. “But it still feels weird, though. Doing this in public, I mean.” He looked down for a moment, catching a glimpse of Connor’s ever-present pride patch, the one sewn onto the front of his messenger bag. He never seemed to take it off, no matter where he went. “I mean, obviously not for you.” He gave Connor a thoughtful smile. “You’ve been doing this a lot longer than I have. But, for me, it’s really... it’s really weird for me. I’m not used to doing this where people can actually see me.”

“I know,” Connor said, pressing a kiss against his temple. “But you’ll get used to it. I promise.”

Kevin ended up really liking this bar, despite the strange décor and the non-descript substances adorning the floor. They ate unlimited tacos for only five dollars each, making Kevin feel both satisfied and puke-y at the same time. But it was the good kind of puke-y, the kind where he felt full and happy and content. He was also surprised to find that he rather enjoyed the taste of margaritas. It was Connor’s favorite drink, second only to wine, but Kevin didn't think the drink would appeal to him. He wasn’t typically a sour kind of guy—he had much too big a sweet tooth for that—but he found himself downing several margaritas with ease. Connor kept on telling Kevin to slow down, though, since he didn’t have a very high alcohol tolerance. Kevin tried to obey, but he knew he’d probably had one too many by the time he signed himself and Connor up for not one, not two, but three karaoke songs.

“Look,” Kevin slurred, pointing to the book. He let out a hiccup. “See this song?”

Connor looked down to where Kevin was pointing. “I Got You, Babe, by Sonny and Cher.” He looked back up at Kevin, arching an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Kevin said, before hiccuping again. “I signed us up for it. We’re next.”

“You did not.” Connor’s eyes went wide. “Kevin. Kevin, look at me. You don’t sing, remember?”

“You,” Kevin pointed a finger in Connor’s face, before accidentally stumbling back a little. “You don’t know that for sure.”

“Yes, I do.” Connor tilted his head, looking at Kevin with a fond smile. “I’ve heard you sing before, remember? It’s not something these innocent people need to be subjected to.”
“You told me I could have fun tonight,” Kevin frowned, jutting out his bottom lip in a pouty face. He knew he’d passed down the same bad habit to Charlie, but he was much too drunk to care right now. He downed the rest of his margarita in one go before nearly dropping the glass to the floor. It would have made a horrible mess, had Connor not caught it mid-air and placed it back on the bar. “Come on.” Kevin reached out and grabbed Connor by the hips. He squeezed them rather hard, liking the way the soft squishy-ness felt in his hands. “I wanna sing with you. Please? Pretty please?”

“Fine,” Connor sighed, circling his hands around Kevin’s neck. Kevin grinned, trying his hardest not to purr when Connor’s fingers started playing with the little hairs on the back of his head. It made his belly feel all warm and tingly. “But no more margaritas, okay? That has to be the deal.”

Kevin scrunched up his face. He couldn’t promise something like that. Not now that he’d already discovered how much he loved margaritas. “No.” He shook his head, and hiccuped again. "No deal.”

“Promise me,” Connor warned, a stern finger pointed in Kevin’s face. “Or no Sonny and Cher.”

“Fine,” he huffed, and stuck out his tongue. “Mom.”

As it turned out, Connor was right—Kevin was as terrible a singer as he was drunk, but it was one of those moments in life that was almost so bad it was good. The two of them laughed a lot, upon realizing that Kevin was too inebriated to remember the words, even though they were literally right there on the screen, forcing Connor to sing with a total stranger named Fran.

As Kevin leaned back against the bar and watched Connor finish out the rest of the song with Fran, a stupid grin on his face and boner in his pants, he realized that he’d never felt more free in his life than he did right at the moment. He couldn’t even believe that this feeling in his chest, this feeling of freedom, was happening here of all places, in this ridiculous dive bar in these ridiculous pants (Connor had taken him shopping only a few days prior, in preparation of their date), singing Sonny and Cher and drinking margaritas. It was something he’d never thought he’d have, not after everything he’d been through, but, now, here he was—here, being gay, being very, very gay, and maybe not so openly, not in public, anyway, not yet; but right here, right now, in this place, in this safe little corner of the world, he could be. And that was enough for Kevin.

Kevin had kept his word and stopped drinking after the Cher song. He did make a few not-very-sly attempts to sneak a drink or two, but Connor stopped him by pressing kisses into his face, and turning him back around. It wasn’t very hard to do, Kevin’s body was so limp. He’d never seen Kevin this drunk before, but Connor had to admit that he did look very happy, and that was a rare occasion, indeed. His face was glowing pink and glossy from sweat and his smile was genuine, making Connor feel happy, too.

Kevin put a few more songs into the karaoke queue and was back to singing quite terribly over by the stage, while Connor watched on with a smile.

“So, you finally landed yourself a man, huh?” The bartender, Mark, said, as he slid a drink towards Connor. A freebie. Mark always gave him at least one freebie. “It doesn’t look like he can hold his liquor very well. Are you sure he’s the one?”

“Positive.” Connor turned to face Mark, handing him a two-dollar tip. “Awww,” he said, in a baby
voice, reaching up and pinching one of Mark’s cheeks. “You’re not jealous, are you?”

Mark’s cheeks flushed, just a tad. “Maybe.” He smiled. “But only a little.”

Connor had known Mark for years; after all, he’d been the bartender here at *The Sun Trapp* since forever. He was about ten years older than Connor and always kept himself very fit and clean-shaven. He was nice, too. And kind. He had very kind eyes, at least, sort of like Kevin. They’d slept together a few times, back when Connor first returned to Utah about nine or ten months ago. It wasn’t the best sex he’d ever had, but it was enough to keep the hole in Connor’s heart filled long enough to make it through his mother’s illness. But then he went to Disney World, with Kevin and the others, and everything changed after that. Everything changed for the better and he hadn’t been with another man since then. Kevin was the only one he wanted. He’d always only wanted Kevin.

“So, I’m guessing you’ll want the key then?” Mark smirked, and dangled the bathroom key in front of his face. “For when idiot boy is done singing, I mean.”

The question made Connor nearly choke on his drink. “No,” he laughed, snorting, as he set the glass down. “God, no. Kevin isn’t exactly a bathroom sex kind of guy.” Neither was Connor, but he’d had enough drunken nights in this place over the years to warrant the occasional use of the key. “Thanks for the offer, though.”

“What is it you see in him, anyway?” Mark mused, eyeing Kevin again, who was entirely too sweaty, singing something loud and awful with his entire heart. “Other than his looks, I mean. Seems kind of weird and unhinged to me.”

Connor smiled to himself, and rested his chin against his palm. It was a hard question to answer. The simple truth was that Connor didn’t know the answer. He only knew that he loved Kevin, with his entire being. He loved every last bit of him, every single ounce of his stupid face, from his head down to his toes. He loved who Kevin was on the inside; how caring and smart and gentle he was. He even loved whenever Kevin got jealous or angry about something, because it never lasted very long and he always looked really cute whenever his face got all scowl-y and pouty and put out. He loved Kevin for the dork that he was, deep down inside, and for how he always put Charlie first, no matter what. He always put her first—before love, before career, before everything.

“I love him,” Connor said softly, opting for the truthful answer. “I don’t know why, exactly, but I do.”

Mark snorted at that, but then raised his water in a cheers. “Well, here’s to love, then.”

“To love.” Connor smiled, and raised his glass as well, clinking them together.

“Hey you,” Kevin murmured into Connor’s mouth the moment he returned from singing. He was hot and sweaty, his hands wandering eagerly over the meat of Connor’s hips. “How’d I do?”

“Mmm,” Connor parted their lips just enough to speak. “Your singing just keeps on getting worse and worse the longer I sit here. It’s amazing.”

“Thanks.” Kevin grinned, and slid a hand up over Connor’s thigh, making a breath catch in his throat. Kevin’s eyes looked different than they had before; hungrier, darker. Connor knew it was probably due to all of the alcohol he’d ingested, coupled by this newfound feeling of reckless abandon. It was a feeling that Kevin Price most likely had never experienced in his life, until tonight. Kevin dove right back in for another sloppy, wet kiss, letting one of his hands roam deeper between Connor’s legs. “Mmm,” Kevin pulled back with a low gasp. “Wanna get out of here?”
They got back to Kevin’s house in one piece, thanks to Uber, both of them drunk and devouring each other’s faces with everything they had. Charlie wasn’t home, but even in his drunken state, Kevin knew it probably wasn’t the right night to have sex. Not anymore, anyway. They were much too inebriated for that, and he wanted their first time—their real first time—to be romantic and sweet and special. He didn’t know exactly how it should be, but he knew it shouldn’t be like this.

“Wait,” Kevin gasped, as Connor hands wasted no time in going for his belt. He was pressed up against the front door, Connor in front of him, fumbling to remove his pants. “Wait, wait, wait. Hold on a sec.”

Connor paused, but looked awfully confused. They had made a deal, after all—tonight was going to be the night. Kevin took in a deep breath and placed his hands on Connor’s shoulders, trying to steady them both.

“I think we’re too drunk?” Kevin said, but it came out sounding more like question. He was embarrassed by how badly his words were slurring. “I thought tonight would be—you know, but I’m seeing two of you right now. I don’t think we should?”

“I don’t either,” Connor said, leaning back in for another kiss, regardless. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t—,” he lowered his voice, whispering the rest of the sentence into Kevin’s ear. He pulled back with a mischievous grin, making Kevin’s insides turn to goo right where he stood.

“Here?” Kevin asked, but then quickly closed his eyes with a groan as soon as Connor began caressing him where he wanted it most. He nodded yes and leaned back against the door, while Connor quickly tugged his pants down until they pooled around his ankles.

He felt so exposed like this, more so than he had the other night on the couch, where it was dark and they had a blanket over them. He wasn’t used to being half-naked in his living room like this, but he had to remind himself that Charlie wasn’t here. She was at his parents’ house for the night. He was allowed to do this. It was okay.

“Connor, oh,” he moaned, as the man on his knees licked him. “Oh, gosh. You don’t have to do this. You really don’t have to do this. It’s—“

“I want to,” Connor said, his hands gently gliding up and down Kevin’s outer thighs. “I love you.” And, with that, he took Kevin into his mouth, fully and completely.

Connor’s lips felt even warmer than his hands. It felt wonderful, but it wasn’t enough to stop the negative thoughts from seeping their way in, trying to make him feel dirty and guilty. He opted to tangle his fingers in Connor’s hair, instead, trying to focus on how his lips and tongue were made of magic. He didn’t much care to think about why Connor was probably so skilled at this, didn’t want to think about those other men—the ones Connor had been with before Kevin. Those men didn’t matter anymore. Connor had said so himself. All he wanted was Kevin. The thought made Kevin grin like a great big dummy as he leaned back against the door, rocking his hips back and forth into Connor’s mouth. He was quieter this time, though, because of the late hour of the night and because his nosy neighbor, Nell, was always up late, sitting on her porch with her cats, but he couldn’t help but cry out as he tugged hard on Connor’s hair and gushed into his mouth.
“Look, Daddy!” Charlie shouted, as she bolted right through Chuck-E-Cheese, making a beeline for the ball pit. The place was nearly empty, with it being Christmas Eve and all, and Kevin and Connor were struggling to keep up with her sprint. “Look, Daddy! It’s the ball pit! It’s the ball pit!”

“I see it, hun—please slow down,” Kevin begged, but the little girl just kept on running. By the time they reached their destination, Kevin was gasping for breath, his hands clutching at his knees for support.

“You don’t have to run next time, sweetie,” Connor gently reprimanded, carding a hand through her dark curls. “The ball pit isn’t going anywhere.”

Charlie nodded, and soon began tugging at Connor’s shirt. That was usually her little hint to him that she wanted a hug, or to be picked up, or both. With a grin, Connor knelt down and pulled her into an embrace.

“Are you gonna come in the ball pit with me, Uncle Connor?” She asked, as he pulled back. She jumped up and down a couple of times. “Pretty please?”

“Oh, uh—,” Connor stammered, looking up at Kevin for support. “Are adults even allowed in the ball pit?”

“Daddy’s been in the ball pit with me lots of times,” Charlie said, pulling impatiently at the hem of Connor’s shirt. She looked up at Kevin. “Right, Daddy? Tell Uncle Connor about all the times you went in the ball pit.”

“Yeah, Daddy.” Connor attempted to stifle a laugh. “Tell me about all the times you went in the ball pit.”

“She was only three-years-old when I did that, alright?” Kevin defended himself, his face turning the most adorable shade of pink. “She was too scared to go in alone. What was I supposed to do?”

“I’m too scared to go in today, Daddy,” Charlie lied, pretending to feign fear. It wasn’t very convincing, though, considering the shit-eating grin plastered to her face. “You and Uncle Connor have to come in with me.”

“Yeah, right. I’m not falling for that again,” Kevin said, and tossed her right over the divider and into the ball pit, where she immediately erupted into a fit of giggles. Kevin leaned over the side of the pit, grinning at his little girl as he watched her flail around amongst the multi-colored balls.

“Daddy!” She squealed, a big smile on her face as she swam back over to entrance of the pit. “What was that for?”

“Payback,” he said, and leaned down so he could kiss the top of her head. He turned back to Connor, once his daughter had scampered off deeper into the ball pit. “I’m gonna get us some sodas. You okay watching Charlie?”

“Of course,” Connor said, taking a seat as close as possible to the edge of the ball pit, so he could talk to Charlie while she played. Before leaving to fetch their drinks, Kevin leaned down as though he were about to give Connor a kiss, but quickly stopped himself once he realized what he was doing.
“You want diet, right?” Kevin choked out, in a weak attempt to make the moment less awkward. He cleared his throat a couple of times, as though that would somehow help. “Diet Coke?”

“Always.” Connor tried to force a smile. “I have a figure to maintain.”

He knew exactly why Kevin wouldn’t want to kiss him _here_, in the middle of a _Chuck-E-Cheese_, empty of patrons or not, and _especially_ not in front of Charlie. Knowing all of that, however, didn’t seem to make it any less painful. It stung; quite deeply, too.

“Uncle Connor!” Charlie cried out as she popped up from underneath the balls, clutching at the netting that separated them. “Can you come in the ball pit with me, please? There’s nobody else to play with in here.”

Connor glanced around at the ball pit. She was correct—there wasn’t anybody else using the ball pit, and he sort of had to admit to himself that the idea _was_ surprisingly tempting. When was the last time he’d gotten to roll around in a ball pit, anyway? Probably not since he was nine or ten years-old, possibly even younger. But, no, he couldn’t do that. He was almost thirty years old, for Christ’s sakes. It would be far too childish, not to mention embarrassing.

“There’s probably a lot of germs in there, sweetie,” Connor said, scrunching his nose in an attempt to talk himself out of idea. “I mean, who knows how often they actually wash those things.”

“Only _my_ germs,” she said, sweetly, and patted him on the knee through the netting. “There’s no one else in here. Please, Uncle Connor? Pretty, pretty, _pretty_ please?”

He thought about it for a moment longer, but still decided against it. “I really can’t, sweetheart. I’m sorry.” He tilted his head to the side and reached through a hole in the netting, so he could run the back of his hand down her cheek. “Why don’t you go have fun and I’ll sit here and watch, okay?”

“Watching isn’t as much fun as much as doing,” she said, rather astutely, and tugged on his arm. The kid was right—watching _definitely_ wasn’t as much fun as doing. She was a smart kid. But of _course_ she was smart—she was Kevin Price’s spawn. She and Kevin had a lot in common, Connor was starting to realize over these past few weeks. She had her father’s eyes, despite their greenish hue, and his smile; his curiosity and his wit and his penchant for trouble, not to mention his charm.

“Please, Uncle Connor? Pretty, pretty, _pretty_ please?”

She was also insistent, infuriatingly stubborn, and just as impossible to resist.

“Okay, fine,” he finally conceded, standing up and brushing off his pants. “Watch out. I’m comin’ in.”

In a moment of childlike whimsy, Connor climbed up onto the divider and jumped right into the ball pit with a gleeful cry. He honestly didn’t even care anymore about who might see him or what they might think of a twenty-eight-year old man swimming around in a ball pit. Kevin was sure to have a field day with this, too, once he returned with their sodas, but he’d deal with that later.

He and Charlie had a blast rolling around together amidst the multi-colored balls. They laughed and shrieked and chased each other around, taking turns throwing balls at each other’s heads and playing hide and go seek. It made Connor feel like a kid again. Well, _almost_. He couldn’t remember his knees hurting this much when he was kid, crawling around in a ball pit. That must be one of the best things about having a child, he thought—the ability to feel almost like a kid again. He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d let his guard down enough to do something as downright _silly_ as this, but there was just something about Charlie’s innocent pleas that made him say _yes_ to this absurdity. At some point, during the third or fourth go-round of hide-and-seek, Connor popped his head up out of
the balls, ready to pounce on an unsuspecting hidden Charlie, but this time he saw Kevin Price standing just outside the ball pit, two diet Cokes in hand. He was laughing his ass off, too, making the most beautiful sound Connor had ever heard.

Connor’s face burned up nearly instantly, and he sheepishly sank his body deeper into the ball pit.

“You aren’t allowed to tell anyone about this,” Connor warned, once Kevin came close enough to his position to hear him. “I mean it,” he said, again. “Not a soul.”

“Not a soul,” Kevin assured him, as he took out his phone and starting snapping as many photos as possible. “These are going to look so awesome on Facebook.”

“Stop it!” He tried to yell at Kevin, to get him to stop taking pictures or video or whatever he was doing, but his laughs wouldn’t allow him the good fortune of sounding even the slightest bit serious. “I mean it, stop it!” His desperate begging was being drowned out giggles—both his own and Kevin’s and Charlie’s. As the laughter subsided, Charlie climbed up onto Connor’s belly and gave him a big, fat kiss right on his cheek. As he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tightly against his chest, he realized that he couldn’t hear Kevin’s laughter anymore. Then, when he looked over to where Kevin had just been standing, he was nowhere to be seen.

“Look, Uncle Connor!” Charlie cried out, pointing to the entrance of the ball pit. “Daddy’s coming!”

Sure enough, Kevin jumped right into the pit with a big splash and swam over to Connor and Charlie, who were both covered up to their necks in brightly-colored balls. Connor was leaning back against the wall of the pit, holding Charlie in his arms.

“I love you,” Kevin said, and laid an unexpected kiss right on Connor’s cheek. To say Connor was taken aback by the public display of affection would have been an understatement. Kevin had kissed him in public—in front of Charlie, of all people. Charlie. Connor felt his mouth drop open just a little from the shock of it all, but no words came out. Kevin then leaned down and gave his daughter a kiss on the cheek. “I love you, too.”

“Uncle Connor?” Charlie asked sweetly, raising her arms in the air so that Connor could pull her nightgown over her head. The material was soft and it had little snowman and Santa designs all over it. “Are you gonna stay over tonight?”

Connor froze for a moment, unsure of how he should answer that question. He certainly wanted to stay over, of course. He always did. And tonight was Christmas Eve, after all; even more reason to stay. But the problem was that he and Kevin hadn’t actually talked about that, yet. Thus far in their relationship, he’d only been allowed to stay over if Charlie wasn’t home. But tonight was Christmas Eve, and he sure did want to stay.

If he stayed over, then he would get to partake in all of those Christmassy things parents got to do with their kids on Christmas Eve. He let his mind wander for a moment, imagining himself, Charlie and Kevin watching movies together and baking sugar cookies. Then, once ten o’clock rolled around, he’d help Charlie and Kevin put out fresh baked cookies for Santa, alongside a glass of chilled milk. Then, after Charlie went to bed, Connor and Kevin could have a couple of glasses of wine and eat up Santa’s cookies, as they arranged Charlie’s gifts underneath the Christmas tree. Then
they could cuddle near the tree, listening to the soothing music coming from the Yule log on television, and kiss and kiss and kiss, and perhaps even do more than kiss.

It would be the perfect Christmas Eve, Connor thought; if he got to do all of that, with Kevin.

He used to want all of those things with Kevin, even way back when they were younger. He’d dreamt about them enough over the years, that was for sure, and, now, he had a chance to actually have them, in real life. They were all right there, dangling in front of him, like a delicious bad-for-you treat he wasn’t supposed to touch until after he finished his supper. They were almost within his grasp, but still slightly out of reach. Kevin was still holding back, still being very careful about moving too fast, of getting too close, of revealing the truth about their relationship to his family, to the outside world. Perhaps, though, after that little I love you display and kiss back at Chuck-E-Cheese, Kevin might be a little more amenable to letting him stay the night. Maybe. He sure hoped so. He wouldn’t get his hopes up, though, because it would hurt too much if he ended up getting let down.

“I don’t know yet, sweetie,” Connor answered honestly, giving her a warm smile so that she wouldn’t get upset. "We'll have to see."

“No, but you have to stay!” Charlie begged, making grabby hands up at Connor, signaling for him to pull her up into a hug. He did. “I asked Santa for lots of presents and if you don’t stay, then you won’t get to watch me open them tomorrow! Can’t you ask Daddy? Please? He’ll let you stay over if you ask really, really nice. It always works with me and Harry.”

Connor chuckled. “Alright, sweetie, I’ll see what I can do,” he said, and squeezed her little body in his arms. “I can’t make any promises, though.”

She pouted a little, but her sad pouts soon turned into giggles the moment Connor lifted her up into the air and spun her around.

“Your little girl really wants me to stay over tonight, you know,” Connor said, about two hours later, as he slid a tray of raw sugar cookie dough into the oven. He eyed Kevin, expecting him to come back with some kind of awkward response, but nothing came. “I mean, she practically begged me to stay.”

“Oh, yeah?” Kevin asked, still looking entirely unaffected. He looked much too preoccupied with his current task of trying to jam a giant glob of red icing down into a decorating bag.

His reaction—or rather, non-reaction—made Connor’s face crinkle into a frown. “Yeah, she did.”

Kevin kept his gaze on the icing tube, but Connor didn’t miss the way his mouth curled upwards, even if only slightly. “So, what did you tell her?”

Frustrated, but trying not to show it, Connor attempted to keep his cool. “I told her I had to ask her father.”

There. That ought to provoke some kind of reaction out of him. But Kevin still looked entirely unfazed, still with that goddamn lip curled up. “Yeah, well, that’s a good answer.”

Having had enough of this crap, Connor angrily threw off his oven mitt and marched over to Kevin,
beckoning him to look up from his icing. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

That made Connor growl—*growl*. “What do you mean *what*? Am I staying over or not?”

Upon hearing the frustration in his voice, Kevin looked up and met his eyes, but instead of his former cryptic half-smile, Connor could see now that a giant grin had taken over the idiot’s face. *Oh.* He sighed. It was apparent now that Kevin had only been *teasing* him.

“I idiot,” Connor chided, but he wasn’t able to stop a smile from sliding onto his face, despite the fact that he was in the middle of giving Kevin a well-deserved *shove*.

“Look, I’m not the one asking stupid questions around here,” Kevin said, bopping him on the nose with the icing bag, leaving a bright red glob on the tip of his nose. Connor rubbed at it, annoyed.

“I really don’t think it’s a stupid question, considering—,” he gestured to nothing with his hand; “the circumstances.”

Kevin’s face fell at Connor’s words, the playful glint fading from his eyes as quickly as it came.

“Did you really think I would make you go home on Christmas Eve?” Kevin asked, looking hurt at the assumption. “To wake up on Christmas morning all alone in that empty house?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Connor stammered, then looked down with a shrug. “I mean, yeah, I guess I did. You never let me stay over. Not with Charlie around, anyway.” Kevin looked even more hurt now, but Connor had to get this out—it’s been bottling up inside him for a while now, no matter how happy they’ve been over the past two months. “So, I really don’t think it’s unreasonable for me to think you’d ask me to leave.” Connor’s voice turned quiet. “Even if it is Christmas Eve.”

“Well, that’s all going to change,” Kevin assured him, as he set down the icing tube in favor of grabbing Connor by the waist, pulling him in close. “I want you to stay over all the time from now on, Connor McKinley, because I love you and I want you to be a part of my life. A *real* part of my life. Not just on nights when Arnold and Naba can watch Charlie. All the time.”

Connor’s mouth dropped open, but no words came out. That made for the second time that day. “Who are you and what have you done with my Kevin?”

Kevin chuckled, and gave him a quick kiss. “I promise I’m the real him.”

“Are you sure?” Connor asked, tentatively. “An alien could’ve taken over your body while you weren’t paying attention. Maybe we should have you… scanned or something.”

“I haven’t been replaced by an alien,” Kevin said, and kissed him again. This was all confusing the bejesus out of Connor because Kevin had been the one to insist they had to take things slow, that Charlie and his family and his neighbors couldn’t find out, not yet, not for a while. But then Kevin yanked at Connor’s waist again, bringing him in so close that their bottom halves were touching. “I don’t want to keep this a secret anymore. At least, not from Charlie.”

Connor’s eyes widened. “You don’t?”

“No,” he said, sincerely. “I don’t.” Then he leaned in and proceeded to kiss the tip of Connor’s nose, licking the bit of red icing off in the process. It tickled, and Connor rubbed at his nose again.

“I don’t understand.” Connor shook his head, stepping back from the embrace and looking Kevin
straight in the eyes. “What happened? What changed your mind?”

“I don’t know.” Kevin’s eyes looked awfully soft now, yet still tentative and unsure. “I just couldn’t help myself in the ball pit today, you know? I just had to kiss you, I just had to, and it didn’t seem to matter that Charlie was right there. In fact, I wanted her to be there. I wanted her to know how much I love you. She should know that, shouldn’t she? I mean, she’s crazy about you, Connor. She loves you, and I love you, and all of us should just be free to love each other and be—be together on Christmas Eve.” He paused for a moment. “And always. Like we should be. Like we should have always been.”

“Oh, wow,” Connor whispered, hoarsely, and took in a deep breath of air. He needed air. Kevin’s words were starting to make him feel all confused and dizzy. This was too much. The whole thing. All of this was just too much. He closed his eyes for a moment and swallowed something very thick, trying with all of his power not to break out crying.

“Are you okay?” Kevin asked, brushing back a piece of Connor’s hair.

“Yes, sorry, I just—I wasn’t expecting this, that’s all. I mean, I thought you might ask me to stay over because it’s Christmas Eve and everything. You’d have an excuse. But, I wasn’t expecting this. This is—,” he choked on his words, tears stealing whatever else he was about to say. He knew he shouldn’t have been crying. This was a happy occasion, after all, but he just couldn’t help it. The feeling was too strong. “This is too much. This is just… too much all at once.”

“No, no, don’t cry.” Kevin wiped at Connor’s eyes. “Please don’t cry. I hate it when you cry.” He leaned in and gave each of Connor’s wet eyelids a delicate kiss. “Unless they’re happy tears. Are they happy tears?”

“Idiot.” Connor let out a tearful laugh. “Of course they’re happy tears.”

“Good.” Kevin grinned, and yanked on his hips to pull him into a kiss. It didn’t take much for Connor to melt right into it because it was the long, slow kind of kiss, the kind where time seemed to stop for a while. It ended up stopping for so long, that neither of them noticed Charlie wandering into the room. They only realized she was there once they heard a high-pitched shriek blaze across the room.

Connor immediately ripped himself from Kevin’s face, pushing him away rather hard. He looked down at Charlie’s face, and oh God, it looked exactly like he expected it to: eyes bugged out, jaw dropped to the floor, and the look of pure shock on her tiny, chubby face.

“I’m sorry,” Connor choked out, mostly to Kevin, because—Charlie’s face. “I am so, so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Kevin said, and let out a little laugh. “Relax.” He walked over to Charlie and knelt down in front of her, whispering something into her ear before picking her up into his arms. “We’ll be right back, okay?”

Connor’s heart was racing, pounding at a thousand beats per minute, threatening to burst through the wall of his chest at light speed. But, by some sort of miracle, Kevin seemed as calm as ever. Nervous, fidgeting Kevin with the anxiety and the panic attacks and the crippling fear somehow seemed completely and utterly calm. It didn’t make any sense.

For a solid minute after Kevin brought Charlie into the other room, most likely to explain to her what it was she’d just witnessed, Connor kept his gaze lingering on the space Kevin had just vacated. Feeling stunned and upset, he eventually managed to snap out of it enough to take a seat at the kitchen table, his face finding its way into his palms almost instantly. He didn’t lift his head back up
for a long time, not until the beeper on the stove angrily reminded him that the sugar cookies were done.

“How’d it go?” Connor asked, running over to Kevin the moment he re-entered the kitchen. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is just fine,” Kevin assured him and pulled him into a hug. “It’s all fine. Just like I said it would be.”

Connor nodded into his chest, feeling as though he might cry. “What did you tell her?”

“The truth.” Kevin pulled back and met Connor’s eyes. “Well, kind of. I explained it in really simple terms. Everything is okay.”

“But what about your parents?” He asked, nervously running a hand through his hair. “She might say something to your parents and then you’ll have to—“

“She won’t.” Kevin reached up and brought Connor’s twitchy hand down from his scalp. He squeezed it. “I asked her not to say anything to my parents. I explained to her that I have to be the one to tell them, not her. She understands.”

“Okay, but she’s five years old, Kevin,” Connor reminded him, feeling as though he was on the border of vomiting or hyperventilating or both. “She could slip up or make a mistake or get scared about lying or—”

“And if she does,” Kevin said, calmly, looking deep into Connor’s eyes; “then everything will still be fine. I have to tell them eventually, don’t I?”

“Yes, right.” Connor let out a long sigh. “Okay. Then we’re okay? Everything’s okay?”

“Everything’s okay,” Kevin laughed, and knocked their foreheads together. “Well, not everything. Santa still has to come tonight and it’s already after ten.”

“Right, I almost forgot.” Connor sighed. “With all the commotion about—well, you know.”

“You wanna help me?” Kevin asked, leaning in to place a small kiss to his boyfriend’s temple. It sent a shiver down Connor’s spine. “Be Santa, I mean.”

“Oh,” Connor hummed, nuzzling into his neck. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Kevin wasn’t sure what he was doing, but whatever it was, it sure felt right.

So, Charlie knew. Kind of. He hadn’t told her the whole truth, of course. He simply explained to her, in as few words as possible, that he and her Uncle Connor have known each other for a really long time and that they loved each other very much, and that it was okay that they loved each other. Charlie, of course, kept on repeating her grandparents’ words of God and the Church and how boys
shouldn’t kiss boys like that and that it was a sin. She nearly cried, telling Kevin all about how it makes God very angry, and Charlie didn’t want God to be angry at her Daddy.

He assured her that God wasn’t angry with him and that he would explain everything to her when she was a little older. She asked questions for a little while, more confused than ever, but, eventually, she seemed to accept her Daddy’s words as the truth. She loved and trusted him—he was her Daddy, after all—and her Daddy could never be wrong.

Once she finally understood, he gently explained to her that he needed to be the one to explain the situation to her grandparents. She nodded and promised him that she wouldn’t say anything to her grandparents, not until her Daddy gave her the okay. Relieved, but also feeling unbelievably guilty at having to ask a child—his child—to keep such a secret, he kissed her on the cheek, and shifted the conversation back to Santa and sugar cookies and all of the presents she'd be getting the next morning on Christmas Day. *Santa can’t come until you go to sleep though,* he reminded her, as he scooped her up and brought her upstairs to bed.

He and Connor gorged themselves on sugar cookies and opened up a bottle of wine once Charlie had finally fallen asleep. It was difficult to get Charlie to actually fall asleep, once she was informed that her Uncle Connor would be staying over. She was overjoyed. But, finally, as the clock approached eleven and Kevin finished reading her *The Night Before Christmas* for the third time in a row, her stubborn eyelids finally betrayed her and she drifted off to sleep.

“Is this where you keep the presents?” Connor whispered as they made their way up to the attic.

“Yeah, but be careful of your head. It’s tight up here. You won’t be able to stand.”

The stairs were the kind you had to pull down through a hole in the ceiling and they didn’t feel all that steady when you stepped up. It was actually sort of terrifying, really, but Kevin had told him that the attic was the only place he knew with absolute certainly that Charlie couldn’t get to.

There had to be at least twenty perfectly wrapped gifts in the attic, all adorned with glittery, shiny bows and gift tags that read *To Charlie, followed by Love, Santa.*

“Wow,” Connor said, as he took a seat across from Kevin in a spot that wasn’t occupied by boxes. It was cramped in the attic and his head, even while sitting, nearly touched the ceiling. “You really went all out.”

Kevin shrugged and turned around a little so he could dig deeper into the huge pile behind him. The tip of his tongue stuck out his mouth as he concentrated on finding whatever it was he was looking for.

“Ah, here it is,” he said, as he pulled a small gift box out of the pile, wrapped up neatly in blue and gold paper. It was topped with an elaborate gold bow that was almost as big as the box. “This one's for you.” He smiled, and yanked on Connor's jeans, beckoning him to come closer. “Come ‘ere.”

He kept on tugging at Connor's jeans until he was sitting right in-between Kevin's legs, head leaning back against his chest.

“Open it,” Kevin said, wrapping his arms around Connor's middle from behind and handing him the box.
“This looks expensive,” Connor said, feeling just a little bit worried. He’d gotten Kevin a rather nice gift; a crystal Mickey and Minnie Mouse figurine with the year engraved on the front. It wasn’t cheap or anything, but it wasn’t that expensive either. But the box Kevin had just handed him looked an awful lot like jewelry, and jewelry could be very expensive.

“Don’t worry about that,” Kevin said, and impatiently wiggled his feet. “Just open it.” Connor could feel him start to fidget, clearly chomping at the bit, so Connor did as he was told and unwrapped the gift. As he lifted the lid of the box, he could see that, atop a mound of cotton, sat two rings; both white gold, one with a purple Amethyst stone and one with a Blue Topaz, situated in the center of each ring, respectively. Encircled around each stone were tiny specks of diamonds.

“Are these—,” Connor stammered, as he picked up the blue one. “Wait, are these our rings?” The grin on Kevin’s face, pressed into Connor’s neck from behind, was enough to answer his question. “But they look so different. I mean, they look beautiful. You must have had them fixed up. Wait, how did you get a hold of mine anyway?” Connor scoffed, turning his head around to give Kevin a look. “It was locked away in my Kevin box.”

“I found your Kevin box,” Kevin said, softly. “When we were going through your mom’s things last month.” He took the blue ring out of Connor’s hand and held it up under the tiny light dangling from the attic ceiling. It sparkled more brilliantly in this dank attic than Connor had ever seen it sparkle before. “I had both of them cleaned and polished and had all the scratches buffed out, and look,” he held it up closer to Connor’s face, “I had them put these little diamonds on the sides, so it twinkles a lot more now.” He turned the ring around under the light. “But the best part is the inscription.” He handed the ring to Connor. “Read it.”

“Oh!” Connor said, and cleared his throat. “Dear Connor,” he read, trying not to laugh at the next line. “I promise not to screw it up this time.” He glanced up at Kevin, smirk on his face. “That’s beautiful, Kevin. You’re a real poet.”

“No, but I mean it,” Kevin said, with a surprising amount of sincerity. “Nothing is going to break us up this time, Connor. I won’t let it. I promise.”

“What does yours say?” Connor asked, picking up Kevin’s ring. The violet stone shimmered, reflecting slivers of rainbow onto the walls. “Dear Kevin,” he read, aloud; “for the love of God, please don’t screw it up this time. Love, Kevin.”

They both smiled to themselves at the silliness of the inscriptions, Connor leaning back into Kevin’s chest, Kevin leaning against the musty old wall of the attic, surrounded by Charlie’s plethora of Christmas gifts.

“They’re so beautiful, Kevin,” Connor said quietly, after a while had passed. He slowly turned the two rings over in his hand, admiring the way the gemstones glittered under the light. “I still can’t believe you managed to slip this out of my house without me even knowing. You are a sneaky one, Kevin Price.” He grinned, still twirling the rings around his fingers. “But I’m glad you did. They’re perfect.”

Kevin took Connor’s left ring finger into his hand and gently slipped the blue ring over his knuckle. Connor couldn’t take his eyes off his hand for a long while after that. The promise ring Kevin had given him years ago was back on his hand, shimmering under the light, glittering the way it was supposed to, instead of stuck at the bottom of some musty old box. He wiped at his face, trying to stop the stream of silent tears from rolling down his cheeks, but it was no use. He reached down and took Kevin’s hand into his own, sliding the purple ring onto his finger. He could feel Kevin’s smile widening into his neck. They lined their hands up next to one another, so they could quietly gaze at their matching rings—side by side, together again, sparkling brightly, exactly as they were meant to.
It didn’t take very long for Kevin’s lips to find their way onto Connor’s neck or for Connor’s fingers
to get lost in Kevin’s hair or for Connor to end up laying down against the floorboards, panting and
gasping under Kevin’s touch, two sets of hands grabbing and pulling and gliding all over each other’s
bodies. Connor could feel something hard and urgent pressed up against his thigh, and he was sure
Kevin could feel the same on his. It felt messy and hot and sweaty, all of their pent-up emotions
bubbling to the surface, pouring out of them in the only way that made sense. But, as much as
Connor wanted to ravish Kevin Price right there, right on the floor of the attic, he also knew they had
a job to do. They had to be Santa Claus, for Charlie.

“Kevin,” Connor pulled their lips apart with a desperate gasp for air; “Kevin, we have to stop—we
have to do the—,” but Kevin just kept on kissing him, smashing their lips together, tasting and
devouring. And as much as Connor tried to resist the feeling, the temptation took him easily and he
quickly melted back into the touch, letting Kevin’s hands roam up and down his back, over his
stomach, and down, down down until—

“Kevin, we can’t,” Connor mustered out, his protests turning into low moans as Kevin’s hand trailed
timidly over the bulge in his pants. “Not up here. Not now. We still have to do the presents and,
oh—,” his sentence was lost to another moan. Kevin’s hand was moving now, moving up and down,
over the front of his jeans; “Oh God, not now, not now. We have to do the presents, Kevin, for
Charlie—for—ah—”

Hearing his daughter’s name seemed to snap Kevin back to reality because he lifted his hand from
Connor’s pants, slowly parting their lips as he did so, and opened his eyes.

“Sorry,” Kevin whispered into Connor’s mouth. They were only an inch apart from one another,
Kevin’s brow drenched in sweat, his hair tousled every which way. Connor couldn’t help but reach
up and touch it, pushing the wet fringe of Kevin’s hair out of his eyes. ”Sorry. I got a little carried
away. Must have been the rings or the, um, the Christmas, or the wine, or something. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Connor continued to card the damp strands of hair between his fingers. He liked
the way Kevin smelled, whenever he got all warm and excited like this. It was hot, and musky. He
really wished they didn’t have to go downstairs. All he wanted was for them to keep going, all the
way, wanted Kevin to keep touching him, all over, but he knew they had to wait. “There’s nothing
to be sorry about.”

“Okay,” Kevin said, with the hardest of swallows. “But you’re right, we really should be, um, going
now, to do the gifts. I’m sorry.” As he tried to sit up, he bumped the back of his head into one of the
ceiling beams. “Ow!”

Connor pulled Kevin back down into him with a laugh and rubbed the back of his head, where it had
just gotten smacked.

“Stop saying you’re sorry,” Connor said, shaking him gently. “Everything you’re feeling is
completely natural. Try and remember that, okay?” He paused a moment, and brushed back the flop
of Kevin’s hair. “It’s okay. Feeling like this—wanting this—wanting me, is okay.”

“No, I know that,” Kevin said, letting out a deep breath. “It’s just been a really long time since I’ve
felt this way, that’s all.”

“I know,” Connor said, and gave his hair a little ruffle. “We can continue this after, if you want.” He
swallowed hard, feeling a lot more nervous than he’d expected to be. This wasn’t his first time
asking a man to have sex with him, so why was he so nervous now? Because it was Kevin, of
course, and his first time with Kevin was far too important to mess up. “After we do the gifts,”
Connor clarified. “We can continue after we do the gifts, if you want.” He couldn’t help but feel
insanely hopeful that tonight might end up being the night, finally, after all these years. He’d better make his desires clear then, just so there wouldn’t be any misunderstanding. “What I meant to say was: I’d really like it if we could continue this—you know, after.”

“After,” Kevin repeated with a furious nod, sweat still dripping down from his brow. He tried wiping it away, but it just ended up getting all over Connor’s shirt. “After is good. I’m okay with after.”

“Good,” Connor said, and kissed the tip of Kevin’s nose. “Then it’s a date.”

Kevin grinned, happy and boyish and stupid. “It’s a date.”

The last of the gifts was placed underneath the tree by Connor—a Barbie Dream House, Kevin’s favorite gift for Charlie out of them all. He had Connor place it near the back, sort of behind the tree, so that she wouldn’t reach for it first.

“She’s just going to go right for the big one anyway,” Connor smirked, as he hid the box as far back as possible. “That’s what kids do, you know.”

“I know, but I still like to try and fool her,” Kevin said, as he grabbed another sugar cookie off the tray—a Christmas tree with green icing and M&Ms on top. He leaned back against the side of the couch with his wine and cookie, watching on as Connor finished arranging Charlie’s gifts under the tree, taking great care in moving around the boxes so that they looked deliberate and artfully placed. Connor had become obsessed with neatening up the bows on all of them, too, making sure they were all visible and that none were getting crushed. Kevin gazed at him for a while as he worked, dopey grin on his face, cookie in his mouth, wine in hand. He took a long sip of the velvety liquid, to wash down what was probably his tenth or eleventh cookie of the night, and he wasn’t sure if he was just getting used to the flavor or what, but he realized that he was actually kind of starting to enjoy the taste of wine. Especially red. His favorite thus far was definitely the petite syrah, a dark and fruity red with a smooth finish. Connor was teaching him all about wine. About wine, and other things. Connor knew a lot about a lot of things that Kevin didn’t, and he’d always enjoyed learning new things.

Upon realizing that Connor wasn’t going to stop fiddling around with the gifts until forcibly removed, Kevin set down his wine and crawled over to where he was kneeling, hunched over Charlie’s overflowing stocking that was too full to keep hung up, trying to force its contents further down so they weren’t sticking out. He laid a gentle hand to Connor’s shoulder, tugging on it just a little so that Connor would fall back into his arms.

“Come on,” Kevin said, and wrapped his arms around Connor’s middle. “You’ve done enough for tonight.”

“You think so?”

“I know so,” Kevin said, and laid a kiss to the side of Connor’s neck. The other man’s eyelids closed the moment his lips touched the skin, as if on instinct. “Everything looks perfect.”

“Mmm,” Connor hummed, reaching up to tangle his fingers in Kevin’s hair. “If you say so.”

“I do say so.”
As happy as he was, holding Connor in his arms like this, drinking wine and eating cookies beneath the twinkling lights of their Christmas tree (a real one, since Kevin’s dad had never let them have a real tree growing up), but he was starting to get a weird kind of ache in the pit of his stomach. He wasn’t sure what it was, exactly. Nervousness. Anxiety. Excitement. Trepidation. But mostly excitement. He supposed it was later now, and he and Connor had made a date for later—a date to continue where they had left off in the attic. But was it too late now? After all, it was well after midnight and Connor did look rather sleepy. What if he was no longer in the mood? What if he was exhausted and just wanted to go to sleep? Or, worse, what if Kevin had managed to forget everything he’d researched on sex, in preparation for this moment? What if he couldn’t even remember how to apply a condom? Well, he supposed Connor would help him with that, if need be, but he didn’t want to look stupid or inexperienced or—

“So, um,” Kevin cleared his throat, brushing back a piece of hair that had been hanging over Connor's eyes. It made a low moan escape his lips. “I think it’s later now.”

Grin sliding onto his face, Connor reached up and pulled on Kevin’s neck, looking rather content and blissful. “I believe it is.”

“Did you still want to, um—,” Kevin trailed off, choking on his words. He supposed that some things would never change—he was still quite terrible at this type of thing, clearly. “Did you still want to, you know...”

“I always want to.” Connor trailed a couple of fingers slowly down the side of Kevin’s face, making his groin ache in a way it hadn’t ached in a very long time. It hurt, but in the most magnificent kind of way, in the way only Connor could make him feel. He was ready, this time. He wanted it just as much as the man in his arms did.

“But I only want to if you do,” Connor added. “I’ve waited eight years for this. I can wait a little bit longer.”

“No,” Kevin whispered, and dotted Connor’s pale cheek with kisses. “I want to. I really, really want to. I’ve never wanted anything more than I want this, right now, with you. I swear to God, that’s the truth.”

Connor gazed up at Kevin for a little while, his eyes thoughtful and lidded. “You have no idea how long I’ve waited to hear you say that.”

Kevin felt guilty for just a moment, at the reminder that he had made Connor wait so long for this—for him, for having ruined everything they had, all those years ago, and for being the cause of so much pain and anger and suffering. “I’m so sorry. You shouldn’t have had to wait like that.”

“Kevin,” Connor cupped Kevin’s cheeks in his hands. “That wasn’t supposed to make you feel bad, you silly thing. I told you already—you have nothing to be sorry for.”

“No, I know.” Kevin let out a sigh. “I’m just so sorry it’s taken this long, that’s all. I’m sorry for all of this, for everything I’ve put you through over the past few years. I’m just really, really sorry. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Connor said, and pulled Kevin down closer, so that their lips were just barely touching. “And I happen to know for a fact that Kevin Price,” he placed a soft kiss to Kevin’s lips, “the real Kevin Price, is more than worth the wait.”

The words made a rush of feelings explode throughout Kevin’s body, the ones he used to be so good at pushing down. He could feel them taking over his cheeks, making them burn, and he was already
so, so hard, he could feel it getting scratched by his pants. It was almost sad, how little it took, but it
didn’t seem to matter. Their bodies were soon tangled up in each other, their lips pressing together,
over and over again, as many times as they could manage without having to break for air, hands
roaming down pants and up shirts and over skin, like they were supposed to do, like they should
have been doing for the past six years.

In such an entanglement, it was getting harder and harder for Kevin to determine exactly where he
ended and Connor began, but that didn’t seem to matter. It didn’t matter because in one swift
movement, as though he’d been practicing the maneuver in preparation for this moment, he picked
Connor up into his arms, bridal style, and brought him into the bedroom. Kevin knew that Connor
would have protested the gesture, would have said to put him down this instant, if he hadn’t been so
engrossed in swallowing Kevin’s face. It was a good thing that Connor’s sensibilities were
compromised, because it felt really, really good to be able to kick open his bedroom door and
playfully toss Connor down onto the bed, as though they were teenagers again, as though they had
done this a thousand times before, as though they had never been torn apart by the universe, as
though the past several years weren’t spent in misery, but were, instead, spent together, exactly like
this.

Kevin was feeling anxious, to say the least, as he gently laid Connor down on the bed. Their lips
were still crashing together, never parting, as Kevin climbed on top of him, one of Connor’s cheeks
cupped in his hand. He wanted to be good, for Connor, but the trouble was: he’d never done this
before. He did have a little experience now, such as night on the couch and their little excursion after
The Sun Trapp, but none of those times required Kevin to perform, in the way he’d be expected to
perform now. And Connor sure did want him to perform; Kevin knew this by the way Connor’s
hands were exploring his body, greedy and insistent, roaming all over, trying to pull off their clothing
as fast as humanly possible.

“Slow down,” Kevin whispered into Connor’s ear, catching his hand mid-air, just as he was about to
go for his own belt buckle. He smiled down at Connor, fondly, his hair flopping down over his eyes.
He knew Connor would have reached up and smoothed it away, had his hand been free. He always
did. “Let me do it for you, okay?”

Connor nodded, but he kept wiggling his body around, as though impatient for Kevin to release him
from the shackles of his pants. Kevin’s palms were awfully sweaty, his hands shaking a little from
nerves, but he was able to slowly undo Connor’s belt buckle. The slowness of his movements
elicited a needy whimper from Connor, a sound that Kevin had no idea he liked so much until that
very moment. Once Connor’s belt was undone, Kevin tried to tease him by taking his sweet
time undoing his pants zipper.

“You’re killing me with this,” Connor whined, kicking his feet a little, and grabbing at Kevin’s hair.
“Please, hurry up.”

Kevin smiled, just a little bit cheeky, and made no effort to speed up. He’d read on the internet that
the slower the build up, the more satisfying the climax, and he wanted Connor to feel nothing but
absolute bliss once he was done with him. He was nervous, though—almost too nervous—but he
just kept on praying that he wouldn’t get so nervous that he’d ruin it, like he did on Valentine’s Day,
six years before, back when they were only twenty-two-years-old. He shook his head, trying to rid
himself of the thought. He needed to focus on Connor, on making him happy, on feeling all of this
for what it was, in this moment in time.
Once Connor’s pants were off, Kevin could see how hard he was, his erection nearly bursting out of his briefs. There was a little pearl of moisture near the top, seeping through the material, beckoning for Kevin to pull them off. Despite Connor’s whines and impatient little kicks, Kevin took a moment to himself, to simply gaze down at the man in his bed. He was a man whom Kevin had loved since he was just nineteen years old, despite all of the years spent in denial of that fact. He had been so young, back then. So frail. And he was still so young and so frail, now, in a way. In a lot of ways. But he was also older, and wiser, and wouldn’t be prone to making as many stupid mistakes. He hoped not, anyway, for both their sakes.

“I love you,” Kevin murmured as he leaned down, pressing a kiss into Connor’s mouth. He parted Connor’s lips with his tongue, making the man beneath him groan, and yank harder at his hair.

They spent a little while like that, kissing and undressing each other and getting each other all worked up, until Connor flailed his hand in the air, gesturing to the drawer. They had decided to relocate the “supplies” to Kevin’s bedside drawer, as opposed to being buried at the bottom of the sink cabinet, just in case they needed to use them.

Kevin had trouble unwrapping the condom because his hands were shaking, so much so that Connor had to do it for him. Connor didn’t seem to mind, however; he looked as though he rather enjoyed it, actually, judging by the way he slowly and teasingly rolled it onto Kevin, tenderly and with great care. It was quite an intoxicating spectacle to watch. In fact, Kevin could have watched Connor unroll it and roll it back on many times over and never get tired of it.

Kevin had never touched lube before in his life, so when Connor squirted a bit onto his fingers, he made a bit of a face. Not a negative face, exactly; he was just a little surprised at how cold it felt, and it had an odd, slippery texture to it that he wasn’t used to. And even though he had read all about it on the internet, Kevin was a little bit hesitant about doing things to Connor’s bottom. He had never touched anyone there before, and he didn’t want to do it wrong or accidentally hurt him. He got over that little hang-up rather quickly, however, once Connor’s briefs were all the way off and Kevin could see all of the skin that had laid dormant underneath and it was just so, so soft. He couldn’t even understand how anything could feel that soft. He had read all about how to stretch the other person and get them ready for sex, but he had absolutely no experience doing that to a person. Connor helped him, though, and explained everything to him, and made sure to let him know exactly what he was doing right, what felt good, and what didn’t, and, eventually, Kevin was able to relax enough to actually enjoy it.

And by the time he finally pushed his way inside of Connor's body for the first time, slowly and carefully, the content moan from the man beneath him filling his ears like music, a brief thought flickered across his mind. The thought told him that perhaps he’d finally made it, after all; that maybe he’d finally arrived on the other side of this Hell, that maybe he was finally healed, that maybe he’d actually gotten past all of his issues and hang-ups and heartbreak and memories and tears.

He leaned down, once he was fully inside of Connor, and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. Eyes closed, lips locked, and hearts beating together as one, he allowed himself to get lost in the feeling of Connor’s body wrapped so tightly around him, making him ache for release, of the soft moans and gasps being murmured into his ear, and of a moment so perfect it was hard to believe it actually existed in reality, and wasn’t simply fabricated by a dream.

It had taken twenty-eight years, a child, a loud, tearful confession on a hammock in Disney World, a sequence of events that his therapist kept on referring to as abuse, and a lot of reassurances from Connor to get to this point, but Kevin Price may have finally made it, after all.
“You’re here,” Connor whispered into Kevin’s mouth, once Kevin was fully sheathed inside of him. He could hear his voice wavering slightly, but he didn’t think much of it. He nuzzled his face into Kevin’s neck. “You’re really here.”

The sensation of Kevin filling him, stretching him, being inside of his body, sent a wave of emotion flooding through him that he’d never felt before during sex. At least, not with any of the men Connor had been with before. He supposed that’s because none of those other men were Kevin. He hadn’t loved any of those other men, not really, not the way he loved Kevin. He hadn’t waited for any of those other men the way he’d waited, and longed, for Kevin.

This feeling was entirely new and foreign to Connor, but it was a welcome change of pace from his usual hit and run love affairs and one night stands. Connor had spent a majority of those encounters with his eyes closed, pretending that the body laying on top of him, pounding into him, belonged to Kevin. It had always been a fantasy, his secret fantasy, for many, many years; a rather sad, and heartbreaking one. But now, here, he didn’t have to pretend anymore. Kevin was on top of him, thrusting into him, and all of his fantasies had come true.

“You’re really here,” Connor whispered again, and let out an unexpected sniffle. He froze for a moment at the sound. Did he just sniffle? They were having sex. There shouldn’t have been any sniffling during sex.

“Of course I’m here,” Kevin whispered back, as he pushed deep inside of him, again, eliciting a low groan from the man beneath him. “Am I doing this right? Because you look like you’re about to cry.”

Kevin was right, Connor realized, as he blinked back unshed tears. The problem was that the floodgates were opened now, the gateway to his heart, and it was starting to take a toll on his stoicism, on his outer shell, the one that had protected him all these years, the one he had grown years ago, after Kevin had left him, to keep himself safe, to stop himself from being vulnerable, even when he laid in another man’s bed. It was starting to crumble now, though, and his ability to control his emotions was starting to crumble along with it.

“I’m fine. It’s just—I’ve waited so long to feel this,” Connor said, gripping at Kevin’s waist, to try and push him deeper inside. “To feel you inside me like this.”

Kevin reached up to inspect Connor’s eyes. As he ran the tip of his finger along the underside of one of Connor’s eyelids, his face fell. “You are crying.”

“Maybe.” Connor started laughing shortly after, at the sheer absurdity of it all. “Maybe I am.” It was the tearful kind of laugh, the kind where his eyes were probably still smiling and there was still definite laughter coming out of his mouth, but there were also rampant sniffs and tears running down his cheeks. “I think you should know that I have never cried during sex before.” He laughed, again, before covering his face with his hands. “Oh, God, I’m such an idiot.” He wiped furiously at his eyes. “This isn’t what I do. I don’t cry during sex. Connor McKinley does not cry during sex. I’m the king of sex.”

That made Kevin laugh, his eyes smiling and kind. They always were. “I think I’ll be the judge of that, thanks.”

Connor smiled back, placing his hands on either side of Kevin’s face. “I don’t know why this is happening. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Kevin said, repeating Connor’s earlier words back to him.
“Okay.” He smiled, and moved his hands so they could tangle in Kevin’s hair. “Are you still good to go or did I just completely ruin the moment?”

“You didn’t ruin anything,” Kevin said and sat up a little straighter so he was in a better position to thrust into him. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

It lasted for about fifteen minutes, which was to be expected, considering they had both been waiting for it for so long. Keeping their eyes locked, Kevin rocked his hips back and forth in a perfect rhythm, thrusting into Connor at just the right angle, in the angle that made sure Connor’s spot kept getting hit. It felt incredible, and important, and once Kevin’s face changed and his body tensed up, signaling to Connor that he was about to come, Connor let it all out with a quiet moan, relishing in the feeling of a very spent Kevin collapsing down atop his chest.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep yet,” Kevin whispered into Connor’s ear only a few minutes later, fingers gliding through damp strands of reddish hair. “We still have to change the sheets.”

They were both lying atop the blankets, bodies limp and spent and sated, tangled up in each other, drenched from head to toe in sweat. Kevin curled an arm around Connor’s waist and pulled him closer, his body feeling warm and soft and sticky under his hands. Connor’s lightly freckled skin was flushed a light shade of pink, rosy and shiny and glowing. Kevin curled a hand around his waist, trailing a hand over the slickened skin of Connor’s belly, before venturing down, over the meat of his thigh, spreading the slippery substance all over his skin. Slowly, and as though they had all the time in the world, he moved his hand back up the same way it came, wrapping a protective hand around Connor’s middle, where his skin was the warmest and he could feel the remnants of Connor’s earlier release still stuck to his belly. As Kevin let his fingers explore the substance, he was surprised to find how much he liked it: feeling it and touching it and twisting it around, getting it all over his fingers. The action made him feel dirty, and the fact that he liked it, that he liked this made him feel guilty, and ashamed, but the feeling quickly passed. He had to just keep reminding himself that it was okay to like this. And Kevin still couldn’t believe how lucky he was to have this, to have Connor by his side once again; to have him in his life, in his arms, and in his bed. But regardless of how much luck they had or how much Kevin was enjoying simply basking in the moment, in their afterglow, they really did need to change the sheets and get dressed, before heading off to sleep.

“Connor?” Kevin whispered again, nuzzling his face into the back of his neck, where the tiny hairs were wet and prickly and tickled at his nose. “Wake up, sleepyhead—we have to change the sheets.”

“Mmph,” Connor mumbled out a reply, a sliver of drool leaking out of the side of his mouth. His eyes had gone all sorts of droopy and it seemed to be a great struggle for him to pry even one of them open. “Do we have to?” He murmured, and promptly snuggled deeper into the pillow. “Cause it really doesn’t bother me. I actually kinda like it.” He wiggled his body around the sheets, sleepy grin on his face, to further illustrate his point.

“Yes, we have to,” Kevin said, rubbing circles into Connor’s belly, that still felt a little slick. “Charlie is going to burst in here at the crack of dawn tomorrow and jump right into bed with us. She always does. It’s sort of become our Christmas tradition. She comes running in at like five in the morning and tries to wake me up, but I refuse, of course, because it’s five in the morning, so then she always ends up falling back asleep next to me and then we sleep until nine or ten.” He paused a moment,
waiting for Connor to say something, but nothing ever came. “And it'll make me feel really weird, if… well, if it's not clean, you know?”

The man wrapped up in Kevin’s arms, red hair splayed every which way across his chest, responded by letting out a snore—a very loud snore.

“Connor?” Kevin gently shook his shoulder. “Connor, did you hear me?”

Another snore, but this time it was loud enough to startle himself awake. “Huh?”

Tilting his head to the side, Kevin couldn’t help but smile. “I said Charlie likes to run in here on Christmas morning, so we have to change the sheets.”

“Oh,” Connor hummed into the pillow. “Sorry, I get really sleepy after sex.” As he hugged the pillow closer to his chest, a sly smile slid onto his face. “Especially good sex.”

Good? Was Kevin actually… good? He had expected to be decent enough, sure, considering all the research he's done, but good?

“Wait, so are you saying I was good?” Kevin asked, sounding more surprised than intended. Connor nodded into the pillow, looking dangerously close to dozing off again. “Really? Because you don't have to lie to me, you know. I'm a big boy. I can handle the truth.”

That must have been a very amusing statement to make because Connor’s face was once again pressed down into the pillow, laughing as though Kevin’s comment was simultaneously the funniest, and also the stupidest, thing he’d ever heard in his life. “You already know you're an idiot, so I'm not even going to say it.”

It took a few moments for Kevin to fully process Connor’s compliment, but, once he did, it was impossible to wipe the grin off his face.

“I can’t believe I was actually good.”

“Not just good,” Connor said, pulling Kevin down into him by the scruff of his neck. “Very good.”

Connor’s mouth was up against Kevin’s ear now, sleepily mumbling out praises and compliments, cheeks glowing pink and happy. The moment was quiet and raw and perfect. It was a moment Kevin had imagined in his head, many times over, for years now; one he’d dreamt about ever since he was nineteen years old. He knew Connor had dreamt about it, too, and now it was real. It was finally happening in real life, and the reality of it was so much better than it had been in dreams. It was better because it was right here, right now, curled up in Kevin’s arms, whispering words of endearment into his ear, guttural and soft. His entire future, the entire rest of his life, was right here, laying beside him, wrapped up in his arms, close to dozing off again, calm, happy and sated. And it was good; reality was good, and Kevin was good – Connor had just said so, himself - and he just couldn’t help it: he grinned like an idiot for a really long time after that.

He grinned as he dragged a very disgruntled and unwilling Connor out of bed, who was yawning and muttering curses under his breath the whole time, and he kept on grinning as they sleepily changed the sheets and the pillowcases, too. He grinned as they stepped into the shower, and as he took his time lathering Connor’s body up with sweet-smelling lavender body wash. He kept on grinning after they dried themselves off, and he searched his dresser drawer for a set of pajamas for Connor to wear that night, for his first real overnight stay in Kevin’s home. Connor noted that he didn’t really need pajamas—he rather liked sleeping in just his briefs, or in nothing at all, really—but Kevin reminded him, yet again, of the existence of Charlie and her penchant for hopping into his bed
at five in the morning on Christmas Day. Connor had to wear pajamas, no exceptions.

The final selection: an old, tattered BYU Cougars basketball tee and a pair of Christmas boxer shorts, adorned with images of goofy-looking Santas and reindeer. Connor arched an eyebrow at the tackiness of the design, but accepted the boxers nonetheless. Kevin continued to grin like a dummy as he watched Connor put them on, one foot, and then the other, before sleepily pulling the tee shirt over his head with a loud yawn. Kevin couldn’t help it; Connor just looked so good in his clothes. He didn’t think it would affect him this much, on an emotional level, watching Connor crawl into his bed, his hair all floofed up every which way, snoring the moment his head hit the pillow, wearing his tee shirt and boxer shorts, but it did. It really, really did. It made his grin stretch so wide it hurt and his heart was bursting and his erection somehow returned with a vengeance, even though he’d just experienced release not even an hour before. Kevin was so content that he didn’t stop grinning, not until Connor finally told him to knock it off, that it was starting to get creepy.

Kevin obliged; on the outside, at least. On the inside, however, he was still floating on cloud nine, and he remained on cloud nine long after Connor had drifted off to sleep.

He was in the middle of a dream when Charlie came barreling into the bedroom at half past five in the morning, just as she always did every year on Christmas morning. She flew onto the bed, pouncing atop Kevin’s stomach with a gleeful cry. Feeling like a meteor had just fallen from the sky and smashed straight into his stomach, Kevin shot up with a gasp. He was a little confused and disoriented at first, until he looked down to find his little girl laying atop his stomach, great big grin on her face. She was clutching Cuddles the bear in one hand, while Bananas the monkey had rolled down in between himself and Connor.

“Daddy!” She squealed, a bit softer than usual. He could tell she was attempting a whisper, but she’d never been very good at the whole quiet thing. “Santa came! He came! There’s so many presents under the tree!”

“I know, hun, but you have to quiet down, okay? Shhh.” Kevin placed a finger over his lips to try and hush her. “Uncle Connor’s sleeping.”

She turned and looked down at the sleeping figure of her Uncle Connor laying next to Kevin, his cheek pressed into the pillow, a bit of drool leaking out of one side of his mouth, wearing her Daddy’s old Cougars tee. The expression on her face made it obvious to Kevin that she hadn’t noticed him laying there, nor had she expected to find him there. She looked confused for a moment, as though trying to understand why her Uncle Connor would be sleeping in her Daddy’s bed when there was a perfectly good pull out bed in the living room. Kevin couldn’t blame her for being so confused. Kissing was one thing, but snuggling up in bed together was something else entirely.

“Why is Uncle Connor in the bed?” She asked sweetly, without any kind of malice or discomfort in her voice, and proceeded to climb off Kevin’s stomach and plop right down between them. The action didn’t seem to wake Connor up. He was still passed out cold, chest slowly heaving up and down in a steady rhythm.

The room was quiet, save for the soft snoring coming from Connor’s nose, and Kevin was unexpectedly overcome by a deep sense of calm, despite the situation at hand. This anomaly was confusing and unexpected. He’d of thought that Charlie’s question would have caused him a great deal of stress and anxiety and discomfort. He should have been fretting over his answer, careful not
to confuse her further or alarm her or make her upset. He wasn’t even sure if this entire thing was okay, for her to have seen them kiss or to know that Connor had slept in his bed. But then he thought about it for a moment, and of course it was okay. Most kids grew up with two parents, who both kissed each other and shared a bed, so why should it be any different for Kevin? They were in love with each other, they loved Charlie, and it was snowing lightly out the window, the sun only partly risen in the sky, sending a sliver of light into the room, bouncing off Charlie’s curious green eyes, her pink cheeks, and her stuffed bear named Cuddles, and, in that moment, Kevin knew that everything would be alright.

“Come here, sweetie,” Kevin whispered, and pulled Charlie down into his chest. She snuggled close to her dad, pressing her head of unruly dark curls into the crook of his neck, his cheek resting atop her head. “Your Uncle Connor is here because we love each other. Sometimes, when two grown ups love each other a lot, they sleep next to each other. So they can cuddle and stuff, things like that.”

She still seemed confused. It was understandable. He knew this whole thing was a bit of a sudden change for the little girl. It had always just been him and Charlie, together, as a team, two Prices against the world. And now she was suddenly expected to share that bond with another person, with Connor, a man she’d only met for the first time a mere five months prior. But Kevin knew how much she adored Connor. If anyone was going to be accepted into their little family, it would be Connor. He reminded himself, for about the hundredth time, that this was a good thing—that it was going to be a good thing. Good things take time. Good things take work. Good things take effort.

Nobody said it would be easy, the magnet Connor had gotten them their last day at Disney said across it’s front, they just promised it would be worth it.

He had vowed not even five months ago to live by those words, that they would be his new mantra, that he was done living a life of falseness, that he was going to be brave, for once, and stand up for himself against all odds, and he wasn’t about to back down now, not when they were so close to making it work, not when they were so close to being a real, proper family.

They laid together like that for a long time, Charlie snuggling close into Kevin’s side, Cuddles wedged in between Kevin and Charlie, Bananas wedged in between Charlie and Connor. There were snores and shifting and rolling around and giggles, mostly from Charlie. Eventually, Kevin’s eyelids began to close and he was about to drift back off to sleep, when Charlie sat up again, tapped his chest, and asked another question; this one, more difficult to answer than the previous.

“Is Uncle Connor going to be here all the time?” She asked curiously, and turned to glance down at the man in question. “Like another daddy?”

The question made Kevin’s eyes spring open, meeting Charlie’s sparkling green. They looked so curious and hopeful and innocent. As he gazed into them, he suddenly felt very, very awake.

He felt his jaw open and close a few times. He just wasn’t sure how to answer this one. After all, it was only—he glanced at the clock—six o’clock in the morning. It was only six o’clock in the morning and he was being asked the Big Questions. It was much too early in the morning for big questions or to be this wide awake. He needed at least a couple cups of coffee in his system to answer big questions like this. It was much too early in the morning, there wasn’t any coffee nearby, and he felt far too inadequate.

What he meant to say to his little girl, to try and deflect the question, was: try to go back to sleep, hun; we’ll talk about it later, or something along those lines, but what came out was something entirely different.

“How would you feel about that?” He asked, not understanding how the words just fell out of his
mouth without his consent. “Would you be okay with that? If Uncle Connor… if he was here all the time?”

He hadn’t meant to say the words, they just kind of fell out of his mouth and he couldn’t take them back, not now, not after Charlie had already processed them.

Charlie looked down at Connor, fondly and with the inkling of a smile on her face. He was still snoring loudly, oblivious to the very serious conversation between father and daughter going on around him. He looked so peaceful, and content like that; happy. Kevin was happy, too, because all of this just felt so right, and he was so used to everything in his life feeling so, so wrong. Awful, even. Atrocious. Awful and atrocious and wrong and it was typically enough to make him ill or feel as though he might throw up, but not now. No, now he had Charlie and Connor in his arms, and they’d all get to wake up on Christmas morning and make coffee and pancakes and eat sugar cookies and watch Charlie open her gifts from Santa, just like a real family would. Kevin wanted them to be a real family. Even if not today, then soon, at least; one day, definitely. He’d never wanted anything in his life more than he wanted this, right now. And, much to his happiness and surprise, it seemed as though Charlie wanted that too.

Because she nodded with the brightest smile and placed one of her tiny hands to Connor’s cheek. Wordlessly, she bent down and gave it a little kiss, before plopping back down between them, snuggling into Kevin’s side, seeming content with Kevin’s answers to her questions.

“But we can’t tell grandma and grandpa yet, okay?” Kevin said softly into her ear, as he brushed back her curls with his palm. “I need to be the one to tell them. It’s very important that I get to be the one who tells them. Do you understand?”

She nodded again, and closed her eyes, quickly succumbing to sleep. It took Kevin a little longer to drift back off, mostly because of the stupid smile on his face, and the two people wrapped up in his arms, and the fact that he never, ever wanted to forget this moment for as long as he lived.
Hello!!! I'm back!

I want to apologize to everyone who keeps up with this fic for the super long delay in updating. :'( This chapter ended up being pretty detailed and lengthy, which I hope will make up for it! I have just been having the worst time at work lately, so this chapter ended up taking a lot more time than it should have to complete. I also apologize if it's riddled with typos. The longer I make these, the harder it is for me to proofread them.

I want to thank everyone who has been sticking with this fic and for leaving me such beautiful comments. They honestly make me cry sometimes (happy tears, ofc). I appreciate every single note and comment you guys have been leaving. They truly make all of this worth it, to know that people are enjoying the story and are really getting something out of it. That's just the best feeling, to know that all of this is not for nothing, that people out there actually like it. I do put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into this story, so if you do happen to enjoy it, please do let me know! <3 It really does make my day! (my week, my month, my year, my life, who am I kidding).

**I do want to put 1 possible trigger warning here for the use of the f slur in the middle of this chapter. It's only mentioned as a past memory kind of thing, but just wanted to put that up here just in case anyone is triggered by that.**

Thank you again for all of your support. It means everything to me, and I hope you like the chapter!

**Legend:**

*** = Asterisks are memory scenes

___ = Regular lines are present day scenes

Purple Dividers = Kevin POV

Blue Dividers = Connor POV

~ = POV switch within a scene

Feedback makes my day, so if you liked it, let me know! :)

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A ray of sunlight hit Kevin’s eyes at just the right angle, ripping him abruptly from his slumber. Lost in that hazy, confusing place between sleep and awake, he found himself desperately trying to cling on to a rapidly-fading dream. The effort proved fruitless, however, as the dream had already retreated back to wherever it is dreams go.

It had been a rather pleasant dream, too; one involving Disney World and Charlie’s happy, smiling
face and giant, swirled lollipops the size of tennis rackets. Connor was there, too, watching on as Kevin and Charlie hungrily licked their sweets. His eyes were twinkling, fond and amused, in that way they often did. It was the kind of dream he would have liked to linger on for just a little while longer, but before he had a chance to catch it—poof, and it was already gone.

But, no matter. He soon felt his mouth tug up into a smile as thoughts and memories from the night before began floating in and out of his head. Thoughts of Connor and his sweat-drenched brow and darkened eyes and the way he had tugged so desperately at the back of Kevin’s neck, as though no amount of Kevin would ever be enough. The sounds of his moans. The softness of his skin. The breathy compliments whispered into his ear: That feels so good. I love you. The way Connor had yanked violently at his hair, silently begging him not to stop. Please don’t stop.

And then there was the after and Kevin could have easily gotten lost forever in the after. It was where everything felt soft and tingly and he just couldn’t stop running his hands all over Connor’s body, unable to resist the way it glistened, sweaty and pink, under the dim light of the room. And the way Connor felt beneath his palms as he washed him in the shower, warm and slick and soapy wet. The sight of him pulling that old Cougars shirt over his head before collapsing into bed; spent, happy and sated. Kevin followed suit not long after, his eyes closing the moment his head hit the pillow. He couldn’t even remember the last time that happened, it had been so long.

Then there was Charlie and the way she had come running into his room at precisely five o’clock in the morning, startling him awake by pouncing onto his stomach. The way she smiled down at Connor, so adoringly and full of love, and how she kept on asking the most impossible questions, the kind that would have been difficult for Kevin to answer on a normal day, let alone while coffee-less at five in the morning. But he answered them all—honestly, too—and then she smiled. She smiled down at him, big, bright, and beautiful, before falling fast asleep, cushioned between two people who loved her more than she could ever possibly understand.

The memories had Kevin grinning all to himself like an idiot, and he wanted nothing more than to roll over and bring Charlie and Connor into a hug. A big hug. The biggest. Just as he went to do so, however, a jolt of panic hit him right in the gut.

What if he rolled over, only to find the other half of the bed empty and cold, as he had so many mornings in the past? The sounds Connor had made—the ones of pleasure, yes, but also his soft snores and gentle murmurs of affection, the ones that had lulled Kevin to sleep only hours before—what if none of it had actually happened? What if his memories were nothing more than a dream—a dream that felt so real, it could have been easily mistaken for reality?

The panic didn’t last very long. It was more like the briefest flicker of panic, coursing through his veins before his mind had a chance to catch up. And when he finally did roll over, the sight before him assured him that it hadn’t been a dream. His baby girl, the light of his life, was cuddled up against a boy—a boy he loved just as much as the girl, but in an entirely different way.

His daughter’s tiny body was sprawled out at the oddest angles atop the covers; one of her legs digging deep into Connor’s belly, a chubby hand resting awkwardly against his nose. A sliver of drool was slipping from her mouth, slowly making its way down her chin, and her dark curls, ever unruly, dangled crazy and carefree over the side of Connor’s face. She looked so peaceful like that, Kevin thought to himself; his precious baby girl.

His gaze drifted to Connor, who was lying on his side with one arm draped around Charlie’s waist. His face was pressed deep into her curls, into which he was snoring, slow and rhythmic. Kevin could see the tiniest bit of drool sliding out the corner of his mouth, as well, not unlike Charlie’s. Two peas in a pod, he thought with a smile. The rest of Connor’s body was tucked underneath the covers,
warm and cozy, his auburn hair splayed messily across the pillowcase. Kevin thought he looked absolutely beautiful like that. They both did—his boy, and his girl.

He wasn’t sure what he was feeling, exactly, as he took in the sight before him. It was a sight he had conditioned himself into believing would never be possible in reality. Not for Kevin, anyway; not with everything that’s happened. But, now, here it was: right in front of him. He could see it. He could even touch it. And he desperately wanted to touch it, so he leaned in and wrapped an arm around the both of them, pulling them close, as close as he possibly could without startling them awake.

He stayed like that for a long time, quietly taking in the newfound sensation of two hearts beating against arm, two breaths tickling at his skin, two warm, tangled bodies intertwined beneath the sanctity of the blankets; this feeling of closeness, of absolute perfection.

Warmth. Perfection. Happiness. The words would never be enough. They felt far too inadequate and simple, unable to do even a modicum of justice to whatever it was that he was feeling.

He had no idea what the definition of happiness was or how one could ever truly quantify it using words, but he was fairly certain that whatever this feeling was, the one fluttering around his chest, bouncing off his heart and up into his throat, this feeling of serenity, the opposite of loneliness, was as close as he would ever come to finding out. He tried his hardest to burn it into his memory, so that it wouldn’t start to fade away, the way his dreams always did. This feeling was too important to let slip away. It had to be kept close, so that it could be revisited and cherished and remembered every now and again, especially during the difficult times—and the times would, inevitably, get difficult. They always did.

But, right here, in this moment, things didn’t feel difficult. They felt warm and comfortable and safe. Kevin had his little family, at last. They were right here, wrapped up in his arms. They were his and he was theirs, hidden in a quiet, secret place where nobody could ever find or hurt them. And as he watched Connor accidentally wake himself up with a particularly loud snore and sleepily pull Charlie into his chest, Kevin was hit with the sudden realization that reality was finally better than his dreams.

Kevin and Charlie had developed a little Christmas tradition where he’d make her at least one pancake in the shape of Mickey Mouse. He always failed to mention to her, however, that he’d originally gotten the idea from a boy named Connor McKinley, who once made Kevin a stack of Mickey-shaped pancakes back in Uganda. He had done so on a morning when Kevin wasn’t feeling very well, not long after the incident with the General. The ingredients at Connor’s disposal may have been rustic and maybe they didn’t taste exactly like the chocolate-chip pancakes his mother used to make, but Kevin still devoured those pancakes with gusto. Whether Connor had known it or not, it was little things like Mickey pancakes and late-night Scrabble matches that helped to glue the broken pieces of Kevin’s heart back together and, eventually, fall in love.

Perhaps he would tell that story to Charlie, one day. But, not today. Today was Christmas and he just hoped the smell of coffee and pancakes would wake Connor and Charlie up and lure them downstairs. They were on a bit of a timetable, as Kevin and Charlie would need to leave by two o’clock to go to his parents’ house for Christmas dinner.

Connor eventually emerged in the archway of the kitchen, sleep in his eyes and a very eager Charlie
balanced on his hip. He looked adorably groggy like that, yawning as he leaned against the wall, mumbling something about needing an entire pot of coffee. They let Charlie run into the living room to open her gifts, dragging a half-asleep Connor impatiently by the hand, while Kevin finished breakfast. Her Mickey pancake ended up looking more like a sick cow than a mouse, but he knew she’d appreciate the sentiment, nonetheless—especially since his artistic failure came laced with chocolate chips and was doused in far too much maple syrup.

Kevin took his usual seat on the floor next to Charlie, who wasted no time before climbing into his lap, nearly knocking over his coffee and plate of pancakes, eager to show him all of the gifts she’d gotten from Santa. She held them up one-by-one, crying out what each item was as though Kevin couldn’t have possibly known. The look on her face had him beaming from ear to ear, and he was completely content in spending next two hours exactly like this: surrounded by his daughter’s infectious laughter, Connor’s sleepy smile, coffee, pancakes, and piles upon piles of torn up wrapping paper.

After Connor finished giving Charlie his gift to her—a new Lego set she had been begging for—they both watched on with excitement as she tore into her last gift: a Barbie Dream House. She had gone for it right away, of course, despite being placed all the way in the back, but Kevin was able to convince her to save it for last by using the last of the tree-shaped sugar cookies as barter.

“Do you like it?” Kevin asked, crawling over to where his daughter sat. “I told Santa you really wanted a Barbie Dream House. Guess he listened, huh?”

“He did! He listened!” She cried out with joy. “Now all my Barbies have somewhere to live!”

Grabbing the sides of Kevin’s head and pulling it close, she planted a big, wet kiss to his cheek. It was the kind of kiss only a child could manage. “Thank you, Daddy.”

The words made Kevin’s heart lurch in his chest. He loved making his daughter’s face look like that. Grinning like a dummy, he watched her waddle over to Connor, who was leaning up against the side of the couch with one knee curled to his chest, the other stretched out in front of him. He was still wearing Kevin’s old Cougars tee, along with an oversized pair of flannel pajama bottoms. She jumped on top of his belly so hard, it caused a bit of coffee to spill out of his mug and add to the ever-growing number of stains that adorned that old shirt.

“Uncle Connor?” She asked sweetly, making one of her Barbie dolls walk across his lap. “Wanna play Barbies with me? Pretty please?”

With a warm smile, Connor pulled her in close and kissed the top of her curls. “I would love to play Barbies with you.” He picked up one of the many dolls scattered about, a brunette with wrinkly clothes and big, tangled hair. “I can be this one. Does she have a name?”

“The box says Molly, but I call her Stephanie.”

“Well, I think Stephanie here is in dire need of a makeover, don’t you?” Connor grabbed a tiny pink brush from the pile of Barbie stuff and began running it through her hair. “I mean, seriously, look at this mane.” He made a silly face, gesturing to the doll’s unruly locks and unkempt baggy clothes. “Unacceptable.”

The comment made Charlie giggle as she snuggled deeper into his chest, her own red-haired Barbie dangling limply from her hand. Kevin was content in sitting off to the side, listening on as they played, smiling to himself as he went to work on putting together his little girl’s new Barbie Dream House.
As the credits to *Mickey’s Magical Christmas* rolled down the screen, Kevin glanced at the wall clock. It was already well past one-thirty in the afternoon. They had to leave soon if they were going to have any chance at making it to his parents’ house by two-thirty.

“Wanna watch *Miracle on 34th Street* next?” Connor asked, bouncing a happy, squealing Charlie up and down on his knee. “It’s my favorite Christmas movie.”

“We have to go to my parents’ house, remember?” Kevin gently reminded him, hating the way Connor’s face fell as he said the words.

“Right.” Connor shook his head. “I knew that.”

“But, *Daddy*,” Charlie whined, leaning her little body into Connor’s chest. “I don’t wanna go. I wanna play Barbies with Uncle Connor.”

“You can play Barbies with Aunt Clara,” Kevin tried to reason. “At Grandma’s house.”

“But Uncle Connor wants to play Barbies real bad.”

“She does have a point, you know,” Connor said, half-hearted smirk playing at his lips. “I do wanna play Barbies real bad.”

“I’m sorry, hun,” Kevin said to Charlie, placing a gentle hand to her shoulder. “But you know we have to go to Grandma and Grandpa’s. It’s Christmas.”

“But why can’t Uncle Connor come with us?” She asked, her bottom lip jutted out in a pout. “*Why*, Daddy? *Why*?”

Kevin froze at Charlie’s words, just as he had the night before. She certainly had a knack for asking him the tough questions, always at the worst possible times.

There were so many reasons why Kevin couldn’t bring Connor with them to Christmas dinner at his parents’ house, and not one of them could be easily explained to a five-year-old. Not one.

What could he possibly say? That her Daddy liked boys in the way he wasn’t he supposed to like boys, but was too terrified to tell his family? That, until he mustered up the courage to do so, they’d have to keep her Uncle Connor hidden like a bad rash? That every time he even thought about telling them the truth, every time he imagined the scene play out in his head, he felt so sick to his stomach that he’d usually end up dry heaving and having a panic attack? That his parents absolutely despised her Uncle Connor, that they still perceived him the same way they always had: as the gay, sex-crazed district leader who not only caused their mission to fail, but who had also “turned their Kevin into a homo”. Is *that* what he was supposed to say to his little girl?

“Well,” Kevin began, slowly, before stumbling over his words. “You see, we—um—“

“I can’t come with you, sweetie,” Connor came to Kevin’s rescue, in a tone that was somehow both authoritative and sweet. Connor had always been good at that kind of thing, Kevin thought; at being stern, but also unfailingly kind. Forcing a smile, Connor pulled Charlie close, dotting her cheek with a kiss. “At least, not this Christmas. Maybe next year, okay?”

She pouted again. “Why not?”
“Because I already have plans for today, silly,” Connor said, his eyes going all shiny in that way Kevin knew all too well. “I can’t just sit around playing Barbies all day. I have places to go, people to see.”

Kevin knew damn well that Connor didn’t have anywhere to go this Christmas, short of asking Arnold and Naba if he could crash Christmas at the Cunninghams’. He used to fly in and see his mother on Christmas, but she was long gone now. He wasn’t close to any of his extended family. He didn’t have many friends left in Utah. Not the kind you’d see on Christmas, anyway.

No, Connor was just putting on a happy, confident façade for Charlie’s sake, a fact that both broke Kevin’s heart and put it back together all at once.

“I have to see my family today, too,” Connor elaborated the lie, and poked Charlie in the belly, just to make her giggle. “Just like you do.”

Charlie opened her mouth, probably to ask yet another impossible question, when Kevin finally got his bearings back.

“But I’ll tell you what,” he piped in with a soft smile. “You can pick one Barbie to bring with you, okay? Just one.”

“But, Daddy!” She cried out, as though the idea was utterly preposterous. “I can’t pick just one! What if they all wanna go?”

“One.” Kevin held up a finger. “You can bring one Barbie.”

Nodding sullenly, Charlie hopped off Connor’s lap and plopped down in the middle of the living room, where she gathered her Barbies into a huddle to discuss which one of them really, really wanted to go. Kevin turned back to face to Connor, where a distant, forlorn look had replaced the joy that had been on his face only moment before.

It hurt. It hurt more than Kevin had ever expected it to hurt, and he wanted nothing more than to fix it.

“I’m really sorry about this,” Kevin said in a low voice, wrapping an arm around Connor’s middle and pulling him close. “It’s just… we always go over there on Christmas.”

“You don’t need to explain yourself, Kevin.” Connor pressed a warm palm to Kevin’s cheek, where he gently massaged the cheekbone with his thumb. “They’re your family. It’s Christmas. I understand.” He kept their eyes locked for a moment, as if searching Kevin’s for some kind of answer. “Besides, it won’t always be like this, right? Maybe I can come with you next year.”

There was a glimmer of doubt in Connor’s eyes, an unsteadiness to his tone, letting Kevin know it was a question masquerading as a statement.

“Of course.” Kevin tried to sound as earnest as possible, even though he wasn’t quite sure if Connor McKinley would ever be welcomed back into his parents’ home, not after everything that happened. But he couldn’t tell Connor that. Not now. Not on Christmas. So, instead, he just let his fingers find their way into Connor’s hair and tried to soothe him. “I’m going to tell them soon. I promise.”

“I know,” Connor nodded, still stroking Kevin’s cheek with his thumb. “I trust you.”

The words made Kevin’s heart lurch for the second time that day. I trust you. It was almost enough to make all of the inevitable hardship to come seem just a little less daunting.
As he gazed into Connor’s eyes, he racked his brain to try and think of something—anything—that might cheer him up. But, short of ditching dinner—or, God forbid, bringing Connor with him and causing an actual shitstorm—he wasn’t exactly sure how to do that, until—

“Oh, I know!” Kevin jumped off the couch, visibly startling Connor. “I have one last Christmas gift for you. I don’t know how I forgot.”

Letting Charlie know they’d be right back, he took Connor by the hand and excitedly led him toward the staircase.

“But I only got you the one thing,” Connor said, as he stumbled after Kevin. “I didn’t know we were—”

“Don’t worry,” Kevin said, giving his hand a squeeze. “This one didn’t cost me a dime.”

When they got to the bedroom, Kevin knelt down in front of his largest dresser and pulled out the bottom drawer. He had emptied it out earlier, while Connor was in the shower and Charlie was playing with her new toys. He gestured happily to the emptiness of it, assuming Connor would instantly understand its meaning, but the other man just looked more confused than before.

“I emptied this drawer out for you,” Kevin explained. “So you’ll have a place to keep your stuff when you stay over.”

When Connor didn’t say anything right away, Kevin’s worry wheels started turning. Perhaps what he had thought of as a meaningful gesture would just come off as stupid or childish to someone like Connor, who’d probably dated lots of men with lots of drawers back in New York City. Those men probably gave out drawers to just anyone, like it was nothing, but not Kevin. Kevin had never given a drawer to anyone in his life, save for his daughter. The gift of Kevin’s drawer was supposed to mean something—something significant and real and from the heart. It was supposed to convey all of those important things that were too hard to say, sometimes—things like love and commitment and promises. It was supposed to let Connor know how much he wanted him here, the rest of the world be damned.

“I mean, as much as I love seeing you in my pajamas—and, trust me, I really love seeing you in my pajamas—I figured you might get a little sick of wearing my old Cougars tee.” Kevin scrubbed his hands over his jeans, anxiously awaiting Connor’s reaction. “So, do you like it?”

Connor’s lips curled into a soft smile as he knelt down next to Kevin. “I don’t just like it,” he said, running a slow hand along the wood. “I love it.”

“Really?” Kevin asked, sounding a little too excited.

“Really.”

“Good,” Kevin said, and let out a relieved sigh. “I was even thinking you could start bringing some stuff over today, if you want. While we’re at my parents’ house.”

Connor’s eyes widened. “Today?”

“Yeah, today,” Kevin said. “I took off all week since Charlie’s home on winter break, and I was sort of hoping you might want to stay over again.” He paused a moment, to try and chalk up enough nerve to ask what he really wanted to ask. “Or, um—or maybe even the whole week? I mean, I know week is a long time and I totally understand if you don’t want to, but I was kind of hoping that you’d… well, that you’d want to.”
“Of course I want to.” Connor rolled his eyes at Kevin as though he was the world’s biggest dummy. “How many times do I have to call you an idiot?”

“Apparently a lot.”

“Apparently.”

Connor kept their eyes locked until his gaze eventually drifted back to the drawer. “Thank you for the drawer, Kevin.” He reached out and took Kevin’s hand, giving it a squeeze. “You really didn’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I did,” Kevin said, meaning it. “And you don’t have to thank me.”

Before he knew it, his arms were around Connor’s waist and he was pushing him down into the carpet. Their lips fell together effortlessly as Kevin climbed on top of him, straddling his hips with his thighs. He trailed a string of kisses over Connor’s cheek, never stopping until he reached the sensitive skin of Connor’s neck. His kisses were light and teasing, designed specifically to drive the man in his arms over the edge. He knew from experience that Connor’s neck was the weakest spot on his entire body and that kissing him there would have him crumbling to pieces and in a matter of seconds. Kevin relished in making Connor crumble, in soaking up even the smallest moans that fell from his mouth, in the way Connor’s body felt beneath his palms, warm and familiar, in the way a rush of heat boiled in the pit of Kevin's stomach whenever Connor arched his hips, pressing himself deep into Kevin's thigh. It was all too easy to get lost in Connor, in the feeling, in the whispered praises and words of affection, the ones pouring from Connor’s lips, making Kevin’s last thread of resistance fall apart at the seams.

But, no, Kevin couldn’t succumb to this feeling right now; not with Charlie downstairs, waiting to go to his parents’ house. Not with the clock approaching two in the afternoon. Besides, he still had one last gift to give to Connor before they left for the day.

Okay, so maybe hadn’t exactly been planning this next one. Maybe it was more of a spur of the moment kind of thing that he just came up with on the spot. But it was one that he knew was guaranteed to lift his boyfriend’s spirits. It would show him, even more than the drawer, how much Kevin was willing to give to make this work, how much he wanted Connor here—in his home, in his life, and in Charlie’s, too.

“Okay, come on,” Kevin parted his lips from Connor’s neck and hopped up to his feet, hurriedly pulling Connor with him. “I have one last gift for you.”

“Another one?” Connor asked, raising an eyebrow. “Don’t you think you’re taking this Christmas thing a little too far?”

“Don’t ask questions,” Kevin smirked. “Just go with it, okay?”

Before Connor could answer, Kevin was already pulling him down the staircase and into the kitchen, where he spent a few minutes sifting through the junk drawer, muttering curses under his breath at the disorganized state of things, until he found exactly what he was looking for.

“My spare set of keys,” Kevin grinned, dangling them in front of Connor’s eyes before setting them down into his palms. “I want you to have them, just until I can get your own set made. That way you can come here whenever you want.” Keeping their eyes locked, he ran a comforting hand down the length Connor’s arm. “Which I hope will be a lot,” he added, before leaning in and pressing a soft kiss to Connor’s lips. Pulling back, he lowered his voice. “I really meant what I said last night. I want you to be a part of my life—a real part of my life, and Charlie’s, and not just when it's convenient.
All the time. That’s why I want you to have these. So there won’t be any doubt.”

Connor was quiet for a moment, seemingly mesmerized by the gift of the keys. He kept on turning them over and over in his hands, until he finally looked up and met Kevin’s eyes.

“Are you sure about this?” He asked, hesitation evident in his tone. “I mean, we’ve only been back together a couple months and you still haven’t told your parents—”

“I’m sure,” Kevin insisted, reaching up to card a hand through Connor’s hair. “I want you to feel like this is your home, too.” He brushed a finger over his nose, and smiled. “Because it is.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Connor admitted, clutching onto the keys as though they were diamonds. “I really don’t know what to say and that is very unlike me.”

“Say you’ll stay with us,” Kevin grinned, tugging flirtatiously on Connor’s hips until their erections bumped together. “And that you’ll start bringing some stuff over today.”

Connor nodded. His eyes were warm and shiny under the kitchen light and all Kevin wanted to do was to drown in them. But it was already past two o’clock in the afternoon now and he and Charlie were running very late. The problem was that he didn’t want to go. He wanted to stay right here with Connor and Charlie and spend the entire day playing Barbies and eating leftover chocolate-chip pancakes and watching Miracle on 34th Street twice in a row because it was Connor’s absolute favorite Christmas movie. But he couldn’t. They couldn’t. And that hurt. And if it hurt Kevin, who actually had somewhere to go on Christmas Day, he couldn’t even imagine how much it must have been hurting Connor.

“I wish I didn’t have to go,” Kevin said softly, his hands wandering over Connor’s shoulders and down the length of his arms. “I’d rather stay right here, with you. You know that, right?”

“I know.” Connor circled his arms around Kevin’s neck and pressed their noses together. “But don’t worry—I’ll be here when you get home.”

The words made Kevin’s insides melt. “And the whole week, too?”

Connor chuckled. “And the whole week, too.”

Kevin grinned. “Good.”

The prospect of having Connor all to himself for an entire week exhilarated Kevin, sending a surge of something down to his groin. It bit at him, gnawed at him, made him throb relentlessly beneath his jeans. He wanted Connor desperately, now more than ever, but this certainly was not the time. He was going to his parents’ house, for goodness sakes—with Charlie, with his daughter. He had to calm down, and fast. He couldn’t go to his parents’ house with a boner in his pants.

They stayed like that for a long time: wrapped up in each other’s arms, swaying quietly in the kitchen, ignoring the clock until it was well past two-thirty. They would be late, but Kevin no longer cared. He was much too busy letting his hands glide up underneath Connor’s shirt and over the soft skin, the softest, before travelling down the small of his back and over his bottom. His movements were careful, and deliberate, making little noises escape Connor’s throat, noises that made Kevin ache in the way only Connor could make him ache. He wanted Connor. He wanted him so much that the idea of not tearing his clothes off and pressing him up against the counter and having him right then and there seemed downright ludicrous. He needed Connor—he needed him now.

Then again, the prospect of doing it later was almost as good.
“What do you think about maybe having a repeat of last night?” Kevin murmured into Connor's ear, followed by a nervous swallow. “Later, I mean. After Charlie goes to bed.”

There was a brief pause from Connor, making Kevin instantly second guess his words. How often did couples typically have sex, anyway? Once a day? Once a week? Once a month? He honestly had no idea. All he knew was that he desperately wished they could be having it, now.

“Only if you’re up for it, I mean,” Kevin nervously clarified. “It’s totally okay if you don’t want to. I just thought I’d… ask.”

Connor lifted his head just enough so that his bottom lip could gently graze the edge of Kevin’s earlobe. “You can count on it, mister.”

Kevin felt his chest swell, a flood of warmth filling his belly, making him wonder how on Earth he was ever going to make it through dinner at his parent’s house, knowing what awaited him back at home. Maybe he could cut his family visit short. He didn’t really need to stay for dessert, after all, and if he skipped dessert then he could probably be home by eight.

Yes, he thought, he could definitely be home by eight if he skipped dessert; then they could put Charlie to bed by nine-thirty and then he and Connor could…

He nodded to himself, cementing the decision to ditch dessert in favor of being with Connor—but then he remembered that his mother only made her signature chocolate cream pie on Christmas Day, which meant he’d have to stay for dessert. As much as he craved sex with Connor, he knew it would feel even better with a big slice of homemade chocolate cream pie in his belly. Maybe even two, if he saved enough room during dinner. He could even bring a slice home for Connor, to make up for the delay.

Ten, he decided. He could definitely be home by ten. Until then, he’d be counting down the hours—no, scratch that, the minutes.

Opening the front door to his parents’ home was like getting a glass of cold water splashed onto his face after a very long, very pleasant dream.

“Merry Christmas. You’re late,” his mother scolded him the moment they walked through the front door. She normally would have given him a talking-to about why it’s impolite to be more than fifteen minutes late and how Jack had gotten there early, at about half past one, so that his wife could start helping with dinner, and about how they have been waiting to start the potatoes until he arrived, setting them back at least thirty minutes for dinner. But then Charlie grabbed onto his mother’s leg and hugged it tight, letting Kevin know he would be spared.

“Charlie,” his mother cooed, bending down to pick her up. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

“Merry Christmas, Grandma!” Charlie squealed, laying a big kiss onto her grandmother’s cheek.

His mother proceeded to ask her lots of questions. Questions like whether or not Kevin had her write letters to Heavenly Father and place them under the tree the night before, the way she always had Kevin and his siblings do when they were children. Charlie shook her head no to each and every question, earning Kevin a disappointed look from his mother.
His mother was well-aware that Kevin wasn’t exactly as devout as he used to be. That much was evident in the lack of excitement in his tone whenever he talked about the Church and in how he was raising Charlie, but his mother had no idea as to the extent of it. She didn’t know he’s been drinking coffee every morning since age nineteen or that he’s been masturbating since age eleven or that he wished he could be home right now, spending Christmas with his boyfriend.

No, he had to keep up a certain amount of appearances in order to not raise any questions from his family. He didn’t like questions. Or disappointed looks, or talking-tos, or stares. It was why he sent Charlie to a Mormon kindergarten and why he brought her to church each and every Sunday and why, after services, they went back to his parents’ house for a fun-filled Family Home Evening of dinner and board games, after of which they'd all pray together and read scripture. It wasn’t so bad, living a partially false life, if it meant they wouldn’t suspect anything.

Sunday was the only day of the week he typically saw his parents and, though he pretended to be raising Charlie with the same ideals and faith he had grown up with, it was apparent to pretty much everyone that he wasn’t—which was why his mother wasn’t exactly surprised to hear that he didn’t have Charlie write letters to Heavenly Father and place them under the tree. Disappointed, yes, but not exactly surprised.

“We need to have a talk about how you’re raising that little girl,” his mother sighed as she set Charlie down, the moment of which she bolted into the living room in pursuit of her younger cousin, Bella, Jack’s daughter.

His mother’s words made him wince, if only slightly, but he tried not to show it.

“Believe me, Kevin,” she went on. “I know how easy it is to get swept up in presents and Santa and all that stuff when you have a child. I really do. But, first and foremost, this day must be about the birth of our Savior. She cannot be allowed to forget that. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Kevin nodded, and tried to look as though he wasn’t lying. He just hoped his facial expression would come off as apologetic and guilty instead of tired and annoyed. “But she’s, um, she’s really looking forward to the Christmas devotional after dinner. And we prayed together this morning before we opened our gifts. I just forgot about the letters this year, I’m sorry. Next year, though. We’ll do them next year.”

His mother nodded in approval, and Kevin could even spot an almost-smile peeking from her lips.

“Alright, come on in the kitchen,” she instructed. “Those potatoes aren’t going to peel themselves.”

Kevin knew his mother wasn’t a bad person. She really wasn’t. She was, perhaps, not as flexible and understanding as Connor’s mother had been, but she was motherly and caring, nonetheless, in ways that made sense to her. Though strict and traditional, she did take good care of her family, always cooking them large meals on holidays such as this one, and making sure they had clothes on their backs and a roof over their heads. She brought them to Church and read to them when they were little, always with kindness in her voice and a layer of warmth buried beneath years of religious doctrine. She made them French Toast and omelets on Saturdays and always let Kevin take a few bites of cookie dough whenever they baked together. Baking together had always been their thing.

But things were also very black and white in the world of Johanna Price, with very little room for shades of gray. They were either right or they were wrong, part of God’s plan or against his will. Which is why, whenever she was confronted with something that didn't quite fit into her neat little boxes labeled good or bad, she didn’t quite know what to make of them, much less how to deal with them. And it just so happened that Kevin Price, her eldest son, was one of those things.
She had known what to make of him back when he was younger, back when he followed the rules like good Mormon boys were supposed to. No drinking, no sex, no coffee, no selfish behavior, no eating without praying, no going even a few hours without mentioning God or Heavenly Father or their Savior, Jesus Christ.

Okay, so maybe he hadn't always followed the rules, even when he was younger, but she certainly didn’t know that. He had always been pretty good at covering his tracks whenever he did do something he wasn’t supposed to. Things like sneaking out of his room in the middle of the night and eating extra desserts or masturbating under the covers or thinking about his young twenty-something Sunday school teacher in a not-so-innocent way when he was fourteen years old, but his mother didn’t know any of that, which was why she had always labeled her Kevin as good.

And then he came home one day, at almost twenty-one years old, with a failed mission on his record and a boyfriend on his arm. There was never anything but gray confusion from there on out. She looked at him differently, talked to him differently; like he was an alien and not her first born child. It hurt. It really, really hurt, and he never wanted her to look at him that way again. He supposed it was inevitable, now, with everything going the way it was with Connor, but just because it was inevitable didn’t seem to make it any less scary.

As Kevin greeted and hugged all of his aunts and cousins on his way to the kitchen, he caught sight of his father out of the corner of his eye. He was sitting in a bark-a-lounger with Charlie and Bella playing on his lap. There was a broad, confident smile on his face, so broad it looked almost fake. He looked happy though, watching on as the two girls giggles mercilessly in his arms. Charlie was making a Barbie walk up his chest, just as she had done with Connor earlier that morning. It made Kevin feel sick, seeing Charlie play with his father in the same way she had just played with Connor—his father, who felt nothing but disdain and contempt for the man Charlie had begun to see as a another Daddy.

Part of Kevin was thankful for his father’s kindness towards Charlie, but a part of him also hated the way she looked up to him, as though he was her hero, second only to Kevin. Maybe, one day, Kevin would tell her the truth. The truth about how her grandfather had treated him after he came out; the truth about how he had treated Connor; the words he’d said that could never be taken back, no matter how many years had passed.

His little girl had no idea how much her grandfather despised her Uncle Connor, how the man whose lap she played in had kicked Connor out of their home more times than Kevin could count. Back when Kevin was “out”, his relationship with Connor was quite the sore subject at home, often provoking arguments and tears. Kevin could remember in vivid detail the first time his father had ever called Connor a faggot. He had come over to take Kevin out to the zoo. It was Kevin’s birthday and they had made plans to go see the monkeys at the zoo, followed by eating ice cream and spending a night out at the Redwood drive-in. It was summertime in Utah, which meant it was also unbelievably hot and Connor had shown up wearing a silly tee shirt that said Spank Me, Daddy in bright pink letters across the front. The garment was certainly distasteful, yes, but it was also meant as a joke. His father, of course, didn’t see it that way. No, he ended up shoving Connor out the door, spilling Connor’s blue raspberry slushie all over himself while angrily screaming faggot in his face. Connor had cried for at least two hours after that. They didn’t end up going to the zoo, or to the diner, or to the drive-in. And even after Kevin had begged his father for weeks to show a little forgiveness, to have a little mercy, his father still wouldn’t apologize to him. It was the last time Connor had ever set foot in the Price household, and Kevin found himself wondering if he would ever end up setting foot in it, again.

As he stood there, gazing at his little girl and his father, the chatter of his over-excited cousins blending into the background like noise, he silently prayed that Charlie wouldn’t accidentally slip up
and mention anything about Connor. It was an awful thing to think—he knew that—but that didn’t make it any less true.

He tried to tell himself that it would all be okay, even if she did. It could serve as a catalyst for positive change. It would force him to confront his fears, there’s no doubt about that. It would probably even end up being a good thing. That’s what he promised Connor, just last night, wasn’t it? That everything would be okay. That the benefits of Charlie knowing the truth outweighed the risk.

The only trouble was: it wouldn’t be okay. What the Hell was he even thinking, telling Charlie something like that? Not only was it not fair to Charlie, but it also left Kevin wide open for exposure. He supposed he hadn’t been thinking, that was the problem; not clearly, anyway. He allowed himself to get carried away in the feeling, in the moment, in love, and he tended to make pretty lousy decisions in the moment. And this decision was particularly consequential, leaving him vulnerable and exposed. He was letting his walls crumble, after years and years of developing such a solid fortress. It was necessary. He knew that, now. But it was still scary as all Hell.

He supposed he could just lie to his parents, should Charlie say anything incriminating, but doing so was bound to infuriate Connor. A lie like that, after everything they talked about, all the plans they’d made, would set them right back to the way they were before, which meant he’d have to lie to Connor about the lie, and he couldn’t do that either. Kevin had made a promise to Connor that he wouldn’t.

No secrets. No lies. That was the deal.

After all, wasn’t it secrets and lies that broke them the first time around? And they couldn’t make the same mistake again. Not after everything they’d been through. Not after Kevin had been given a taste of what could be, of what true happiness could feel like, not after all of the promises he’d made.

Besides, wasn’t Kevin supposed to be working up the courage to tell them the truth, anyway? Wasn’t he supposed to be doing that? Wasn’t that the plan? And lying about it would certainly be a step in the wrong direction. Connor would surely see it that way. Kevin was certain of that.

But Kevin wasn’t ready to come out just yet, and especially not on Christmas. He honestly wasn’t sure when he would be ready—if he’d ever be ready. And even though he wasn’t being pushy about it, Kevin knew Connor would prefer the truth to come out sooner rather than later. That much had been evident since day one, no matter how kind and patient or understanding Connor was trying to be.

But how soon was soon? How late would end up being too late? How much time did he have before it would start to affect them? Kevin didn’t know. All he knew was that the entire prospect of telling his parents terrified him. It terrified him to his very core. He had everything to gain and everything to lose. It was a gamble, a risk, with the promise of reward, but no guarantees.

Would he have to trade in two parents and two siblings, a life of family home evenings and big Christmas dinners, for one life partner? And if he did, would it be worth it? His instincts told him yes, but what if that was just his judgment being clouded by the feeling? Would his parents stop speaking to him altogether if he told them? Or would they make an effort to try and understand? Would they let their faith blind them, destroying what little familial relationship they still had? Or would they write Kevin off like a bad check, accepting Kevin as a loss? And what about Connor? Would he ever be able to come to Christmas dinner? What about birthdays parties, Thanksgiving? Would his parents eventually accept him, even if begrudgingly? Or would he be an outcast, a pariah? And how would that make Connor feel? What if they had kids? What then?

He had come out once before, in a moment of careless bravery, back when he and Connor had
returned home from their mission. The two-year freedom high was still fresh on their minds, and Kevin wasn't thinking straight. Look what good it ended up doing him, telling them the truth. All it did was cause a cascade effect, one that had nearly destroyed Kevin’s life, several times over.

Would that happen again, the second time around? Maybe; maybe not. He was older, now, and surely more equipped to handle it. Or was he? How would he even go about telling them, assuming he was ever ready? Would he tell his mother first, privately, and then let her deal with his father? His mother was a lot easier to talk to than his father. And if he did tell his father, would he end up getting physical with Kevin? Would he finally just hit him, punch him right in the face? Would his mother cry? Would his little sister stop looking up to him, once she found out what he was? Would Jack look down on him even more than he already did? Would he want Connor there with him, by his side, when he finally did tell them? It might end up being a detriment, considering how his parents felt about Connor, but if telling them felt impossible with Connor by his side, it was bound to feel a thousand times more impossible without him.

So many questions floating around his head and not nearly enough answers. So many risks, so many rewards. He could lose everything, but have everything to gain. Or he could lose it all, and gain nothing.

He only snapped out of his funk when his cousin, Sariah, roughly tapped the back of his shoulder, beckoning him to turn around and say hello.

“Can we please talk about something else?” Connor banged the back of his head against the couch with a sigh. “Like maybe about how I finally had sex with Kevin after waiting for eight years and how it felt absolutely amazing and how I just can’t wait to do it over and over and over again for as long as I live, until I physically can’t do it anymore?”

He watched Chris roll his eyes from inside the screen of his iPad. He knew his best friend didn’t want to listen to this, but isn’t that what best friends were for? To listen? To be there for you during the highs and the lows and everything in between? And as highs go, this one certainly was a doozy. It was the ultimate high, the highest of the highs, he was pretty sure he couldn’t get any higher. Sure, he was alone on Christmas Day and that kind of sucked, but he was still riding the high from the night before, and he couldn’t see that feeling fading anytime soon.

“Can we please talk about that,” Connor continued; “instead of this morose, downer bullshit you’ve cooked up, designed specifically to bring me down from my well-deserved sex high?”

“Fine,” Chris sighed. “You’re just going to tell me anyway, no matter how many times I say I don’t want to hear about it, so I suppose now’s a good a time as any.” He gestured to Connor, from within the confines of the screen. “Go on, then. I can’t wait to hear all about Kevin Price’s dick size.”

Connor glared at him.

“What?” Chris asked, feigning innocence.

“Could you muster up maybe a little more enthusiasm? This is the most important night of my life we’re talking about here.”

“Oh, right, I forgot,” Chris said, pausing to take a sip of his coffee. “I’m your best friend. That means I’m supposed to pretend to be interested in this.” He adjusted himself in the camera, and put on a
false excited face. “Wow, Connor! I can’t wait to hear all about your first time with Kevin! I want to know all about his dick, like how long was it and how was the girth? Oh, and I need to know what all of his sex noises sounded like, like you should totally act them out for me with facial expressions and everything, and I’m super pumped to hear all about how you just can’t wait to jump his bones again and again and again for as long as you both shall live!” His face soured almost instantly after his spiel. “Is that enthusiastic enough for you?”

Connor sighed, defeated. “No, but I guess I’ll take it.”

He closed his eyes and let out a deep exhale, to try and get his mind to wander back to the night before, back to his happy place—to Kevin. He felt his mouth curve upwards as the memories came flooding back; the way Kevin’s face had gotten all unsure and crinkly just as he was about to come, the way Kevin held him in his arms long after it was over, longer than he had to. The way he kissed him, gentle and loving, in a different way than any other man had kissed him after sex, and the way he washed him in the shower, soapy hands running all over his body. The gentleness of his touch, the whispers in his ear, the way Kevin had grinned for the longest time after it was over, with that stupidly beautiful smile of his. It might have made Connor feel just a little bit cocky, too, because he was pretty sure Kevin hadn’t smiled like that in a very long time. Connor loved making Kevin smile. He loved making Kevin feel all sorts of things. And he loved the way Kevin made him feel all of those things right back.

“Come on, Connor,” Chris groaned, snapping Connor out of his funk. “Get on with it already. We have to go to my mom’s in a minute.”

“Okay, okay,” Connor said quickly, shaking out his shoulders to try and get back to reality. “Okay, so, let me just start out by saying that it was ahh-maaaz-ing!” The words came out in a happy sing-song tone, making Chris roll his eyes yet again. “No, but seriously, it was just so…amazing. I mean, I’ve been with a lot of guys, and there have definitely been some really amazing times, but with Kevin, it was just… everything just felt so…different, you know? It felt so, so different. Like it wasn’t just sex, you know? It was more than that. It was so, so much more than that. It was as if… everything we felt about each other just spilled out all over the place. I mean, the way he looked at me, the way he touched me…no one’s ever touched me like that before.” He sighed in contentment, allowing a wistful smile to overtake his face. “Alright, not to sound like a Madonna song or anything, but it really did feel like I was being touched for the very first time.”

Chris made a horrified face at the reference, but Connor could almost spot a smile.

“You’re married to the man I love, aren’t I?” Chris said, with the tiniest smile. “You’re making total sense.”

“I mean, don’t get me wrong. I knew it would feel different with Kevin. I’m not an idiot or anything,” Connor clarified. “But I wasn’t expecting it to be so...so...”

He lost his words when a bout of tears sprung to his eyes. He quickly wiped them away, surprised and embarrassed over how emotional he was getting.

“Sorry, I’m just,” Connor sniffled, and wiped at his nose. “This is just… really important to me, you
know? I’ve waited so long for this… for Kevin, and now I finally have it. It’s here… he’s here, and I’m just so happy—am I making any sense?”

“Of course,” Chris said, with earnest. “And I don’t want to bring you down or anything. I really don’t. But, Connor, I want to you take a minute to just… look around you, okay? Look at your life. You don’t belong in that town any more than he does. You don’t belong in that house with no job and no friends and no reason to get up in the morning other than… Kevin. Kevin Price cannot be your only reason to get up in the morning. If he really loves you, he should be able to see that.”

“Okay, yes, I know that already, and I’m going to talk to him about it.”

“When?”

“Soon,” Connor huffed. “But, Chris, we literally just started dating again, okay?” Connor reminded him. “And I can’t just expect him to give up his house or his parents or his job for—“

“For you?” Chris asked, and whatever retort Connor was about to make was lost forever. “Even though that’s exactly what you’re doing for him and you don’t even seem to realize it?”

Connor blinked back tears. They had been the happy kind of tears just moments before, but Chris just had to go and bring him down. Connor looked away from Chris for a moment, to try and formulate a good enough comeback, in defense of Kevin—his Kevin. He was starting to regret ever bringing this up with Chris, but of course he had to bring it up because all he wanted to do was share the most important night of his life with his best friend. Well, no, he actually wanted to text everyone he knew, shout it from every rooftop, write a million poems about it, tell the whole entire world about it…

“He’s serious about it this time,” Connor tried to calmly state. “He wants this to work out as much as I do.”

“Really?” Chris raised an eyebrow. “Because it seems like you’re the one doing most of the heavy lifting around here while he’s off living the best of both worlds. He has you all to himself and he doesn’t have to deal with any of the consequences. Why would he want to change that? The answer is: he’s not going to unless you make him do it.”

Connor blinked back tears, and tried to think of a comeback. “He gave me a drawer.”

“Oooh, a drawer.”

Connor narrowed his eyes. “It meant something, okay? There was meaning behind that drawer.”

Chris just snorted.

“I’m serious,” Connor defended, his voice wavering just a little. “Oh, and the keys! He gave me a set of keys—to his house. You can’t tell me that doesn’t indicate a certain level of seriousness, okay? Keys are like… the classic symbol of a serious relationship.”

“Has he told his parents about you yet?”

Connor shifted in his seat. “No.”

“Has he told anyone about you yet?”

“His friends,” Connor defended, trying to make it sound like more than it was.
“His friends,” Christ repeated. “His friends meaning… Arnold?”

“And Naba.”

“Yeah, they don’t count,” Chris said. “Has he told anyone about you, other than those of us who literally witnessed you getting back together?”

Connor paused for a moment, which turned into a long moment, which turned into a very long moment, then two, then three. He was growing weary of this conversation, and of Chris. He didn’t have good answers to any of these questions and he didn’t want to talk about it anymore. Why couldn’t Chris ever just be happy for him? He knew Chris cared about him, and loved him like a best friend should, and didn’t want him to get hurt again, but why did he always have to do… this? Because this royally sucked.

Chris eventually sighed. “Alright, I’m taking that as a no.”

“You don’t understand,” Connor shook his head and looked down to face lap. He bit his lip, a quiet sniffle escaping his nose. “You’ll never understand.”

“I don’t understand?” Chris scoffed. “Did you just say I don’t understand? Are you actually sitting there and saying that to my face right now?”

“Yes,” Connor said, looking up to meet Chris’s eyes. “I am.”

“Do you not remember how afraid James was about telling his parents about us? About telling his abusive, alcoholic, douchebag of a father that his only son was gay? That he was marrying a man?”

“Of course I remember,” Connor whispered, sniffling again. “He’s one of my best friends, isn’t he? I love him.”

“Well, I was there with him when he told them about us. He was shaking, Connor. He was physically shaking. He could barely get the words out. He threw up all over the car after we left, then cried for three days straight. It was horrible.”

Connor looked down and nodded. “I know.”

“My point is: he did get the words out. He did it for himself and for me and for us. So that we could lead an honest life without needing to lie or keep secrets or hide. He looked them straight in the eyes and told them we were in love, that he wanted to marry me, and that if they didn’t like it, then they didn’t have to contact him anymore.”

“That was different,” Connor shook his head. “James wasn’t close to his family. Kevin is. You don’t understand.”

“No, I understand perfectly,” Chris said, with an unexpected amount of tact. “It’s you who doesn’t seem to understand. I thought you learned your lesson when he dumped you the first time around, but I guess you haven’t.”

“There was a reason for that,” Connor hissed, looking up and grabbing the iPad so he could bring it closer to his face. “I told you reason, last month, remember? And you said you understood. Don’t you remember?”

“Of course I remember,” Chris said. “And I do understand. It’s awful, what he went through. It’s absolutely awful. But that still wasn’t an excuse to hurt you, Connor. It wasn’t a free pass to lie to you, to blame you, to treat you like shit every time he saw you, to make you question yourself and
everything you had together. It just wasn’t right."

“Yes, it was,” Connor insisted, but it came out more like a shout. He could feel the anger rising to his cheeks. He was practically seething. “It was an excuse. No, no, not an excuse—a reason. His wife was pregnant, for fuck’s sake. Have a little compassion.”

“It wasn’t an excuse to lie to you, to make you question yourself all these years,” Chris said, gently. “To keep you wondering what it was that you’d done wrong, sending you to therapy, ruining any chance you had for another stable relationship, leaving you to question why the man you loved suddenly decided to leave you. He kept secrets from you. He blamed you—“

“No!” Connor yelled, slamming his eyes closed to try and gain some composure. He could feel his chest heaving up and down, more rapidly than before. “No, that’s not—that’s not how it was. He was scared, Chris. He was scared and abused and I can’t blame him for doing those things.”

“He left you, Connor,” Chris insisted. “He left you high and dry without any explanation. He never even bothered to call you or check in on you or see how you were doing all these years. But, fine, that’s all well and good while he was married. But what about after? What about after she was gone out of his life? After he got divorced? Did he ever come back for you? Did he ever come knocking on your door, apologizing and begging for your forgiveness? Did he?” He paused for a moment, to let Connor answer. “Did he?”

“No.” Connor sniffled, and wiped at his eyes. It hurt. Chris’s words hurt. They hurt so deeply, it was making him sick. He could feel the chocolate chip pancakes from earlier surging up into his throat. “But he had a reason for that. He was traumatized. People do very strange things when they’re in that kind of condition.”

“It wasn’t an excuse,” Chris repeated. “All he did for the next six years was fight with you and blame you and lie to you and keep secrets from you. You two practically ruined Davis’s wedding. Remember that? Or have you already forgotten?”

“I have to go now,” Connor whispered through tears, the ones streaming down his cheeks and into his mouth. He could barely speak now. His throat ached too much to speak. Everything felt tight and painful and he was pretty sure he was going to vomit all over Kevin’s couch. “Thanks for ruining the first nice thing that’s happened to me since my mother died.”

Chris sighed. “Connor—“

“No.” Connor slammed his eyes closed, hot tears leaking out and dribbling down his chin. “I’m done with this. Goodbye, Chris. I hope you have a really nice Christmas.”

But when he went to click the off button on the iPad, to shut him up, to turn him off, Chris said something Connor thought he’d never hear him say.

“I know he loves you, okay?” Chris admitted. All malice was gone from his voice now, leaving nothing but honest concern in its place. “I know he does. I can see it in his eyes. I always could.”

Connor scrunched his face in confusion, and slowly pulled back his hand. “Then why did you say all of those horrible things just now?”

“Because everything I said is still true,” Chris swallowed hard. “I know he loves you, Connor, but he’s still just this… scared little boy. afraid of what mommy and daddy would think of him if they knew he was in love with a man, if they knew he was in love with you. He’s never going to tell his parents about you, Connor. He’s never going to leave that town. He’s never going to give you
everything you deserve because he’s still too scared. He’s just this…scared little boy with too little backbone and not enough courage.”

“Okay, but see, that’s why he needs me, Chris,” Connor pleaded, his hands clutching at his heart. “To help him feel less scared.” He paused a moment, to try and impress his point onto Chris. “I love him. I love him so much and I’m going to help him through all of this. Remember how kind and patient I used to be? Remember that guy? I can be that guy again. I know I can. I’ll hold his hand and help him through all of this.”

“I know you will,” Chris said, a half-smile playing at his lips. “I never had any doubt.” Connor noticed just then how teary his best friend’s eyes had gotten. “But what happens when it’s five years from now and you’re still in Utah and he still hasn’t come out to his parents and you’re still spending Christmas Day like…this? What happens then, huh? After you’ve spent five Christmases in a row, alone and miserable, and you just can’t take it anymore? What happens when you finally lose your patience? What if you have kids together? What happens then?”

“That isn’t going to happen!” Connor snapped, his breakfast making another surge into his throat, burning the skin. “You’re wrong about all of this. You’re wrong about Kevin. He will do all of those things. He will tell his parents. It’ll just take some time, that’s all. He deserves to take his time, doesn’t he? It’s a big decision and he has a lot at stake. He can take as much time as he needs. I’ll wait. Unlike you, I’m willing to do that.”

Connor took in a deep breath, trying desperately to convince himself that his own words were true, that he wasn’t doubting their validity, that Chris was just an overprotective worrywart with a longtime grudge against Kevin. But he wasn’t convinced. Not anymore. Not since Chris’s words had lodged themselves deep into his brain, making him doubt and question and wonder.

“He’s been through so much,” Connor continued, closing his eyes as more tears escaped from their rims. “More than I have ever been through. He can take all the time in the world, for all I care. I’ll still be here. I’ll wait. I’m willing to wait.”

“And what happens to you, in the meantime? What happens to you while you’re waiting and waiting and waiting and he still doesn’t do anything? Are you really content to just sit around, alone and sad on Christmas Day, drinking a bottle of wine and watching Say Yes to the Dress?”

“No!” Connor screamed, after of which he gasped desperately for breath. “This is just temporary. I told you that already. I told you that. Stop making everything out to be a bigger deal than it is, okay? Just stop it!”

“Your life, Connor,” Chris said, in a tone far too calm and serious for Connor’s liking, “is a big deal.”

“What is it that people say again?” Connor sputtered out, the tears making it nearly impossible to see clearly. He wiped at them, frantically. “Love conquers all? All you need is love? Isn’t that what people say?”

“They do,” Chris said, leaning closer to the camera. “But, sometimes, love isn’t enough to conquer everything, no matter how much love you have or how much you want it to.”

Connor’s blood was practically boiling, now. Any minute now, his rage was bound to burst from his skin and spew red and angry all over Kevin’s coffee table. The adrenaline, the anger, was pumping through him, filling his veins, making him go temporarily blind. It was consuming him and he just had to do something. He needed some kind of release, some catharsis. He had to get it out of himself, somehow.
Chris opened his mouth just then, probably to start again on one of his tirades, when something in Connor snapped. He picked up his iPad and chucked it, sending it flying across the room. It stopped only when Chris’s worried face crashed against the wall, shattering to pieces.

A framed photograph of Kevin, Charlie, and his siblings that was taken last year at Bryce Canyon, the one that had the misfortune of hanging directly above the crash site, fell to the ground with a sad thud. It stood on edge for a split second, before flopping face-first onto the floor, and Connor knew there had to be some symbolism in there, somewhere.

Kevin always volunteered to help his mother and aunts prepare the meal during all of these big holiday dinners and his job in the kitchen was always the same: peel the potatoes. It didn’t sound too hard, in theory, but the problem was that there were over thirty potatoes that needed peeling in a kitchen that was far too small and filled with far too many aunts and cousins.

As he peeled, he would always be bombarded with nosy questions about his job and Charlie and his girlfriend-status. It was tedious and he hated how he had to answer the same exact question in ten different ways to ten different people; and yet still, it was preferable to the alternative. He didn’t much care to sit silently in the living room with the men, watching sports on TV and attempting to feign interest in the game. He used to pretend to like sports, back when his sexuality was still in question. He couldn’t really be bothered with it these days, even though he did have a sinking suspicion that his sexuality was still in question, sometimes.

Helping the women cook wasn’t all bad, though, despite the barrage of invasive questions and cheek pinches and playful-but-innocent ass slaps, usually with an oven mitt or a dish cloth. The women were kind to him, in a way his father had never been. They’d always give Kevin big smiles and get excited whenever he’d tell them about how good Charlie was doing in school or how much taller she’d gotten since the last time they’d seen her. The women were safe to talk to, with kind eyes and warm laughter, even if he did always end up answering the same question ten times over, usually with a lie or half-truth. Besides, helping out the women also meant spending time with his sister, Clara. He didn’t get to see her all that much these days, given that she had been away on her mission for eighteen months and then went off to BYU immediately after returning home. He loved his baby sister, and missed her terribly, more than he’d ever care to admit.

His mother eventually shooed Kevin and his half-peeled potatoes onto the front porch after he’d accidentally barreled himself into his Aunt Patty one too many times, nearly knocking her mixing bowl to the floor and ruining any chance for fresh-baked bread at dinner.

It had stopped snowing earlier that morning, but it was still freezing cold outside and the porch was covered in a thick layer of snow. Kevin’s butt got all wet as he sat down and he had to bundle up in his winterwear, but it was still probably for the best. He had started sweating profusely beneath his sweater in the kitchen, both from the heat of the oven and the onslaught of prying questions.

*Do you have a girlfriend yet?*

*I can’t believe that little girl is being raised without a mother. Do you really think that’s good for her?*

*Do you need any help finding someone? Because my friend Erin has this niece who just graduated college and is looking for a husband—*
Suffice it to say, the fresh air and quiet of the deck was a welcome respite.

“Kevin Price,” came his sister’s voice, accompanied by the opening and closing of the sliding door.

Kevin looked up from his potatoes to see his sister standing there in a light pink pea-coat and purple scarf, a warm, inviting smile on her face, and a bag of unpeeled carrots in her arms.

“Mom kick you out?” He asked, matching her warm smile with one of his own.

“Yeah. She didn’t like the way I was handling the turkey, so she put me on carrot duty,” she said, taking a seat across from Kevin on a snow-covered orange crate. Placing the bag on the table, she leaned over the garbage can that sat between them and went to town on a carrot with her peeler.

“So, how’ve you been doing?” She asked, her tone lilted and caring. It always was. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“That’s because you haven’t.” Kevin said, giving her a smile as he tossed a freshly peeled potato into the giant pot. He could feel his smile begin to fade, however, at the realization that he’d have to lie to her, too. Mostly by omission, of course, but still—being unable to share his recent happiness with Connor with the people he loved most in the world was starting to take its toll on him. He roughly grabbed another potato from the unpeeled pile and tried to shake it off.


His sister was about halfway through her sophomore year, as she had already completed a year of college prior to her mission. Not all girls chose to serve a mission, but his sister had been Hell-bent on serving one ever since she was a little girl. She had been chosen to serve in Munich, Germany’s third district for eighteen months, during of which she helped to bring over thirty-three people to the Church. Not only that, but she learned how to speak fluent German while she lived there, and now was majoring in German and Education at BYU. Their parents had never been so proud.

Clara placed a hand over her chest and cleared her throat. “Es läuft großartig!”

Kevin raised an eyebrow in question, to which she just laugh-snorted in reply, like the dork she was.

“That’s German for ‘it’s going great’.”

“Impressive.” Kevin nodded, and threw another peeled potato into the pot. “You have the accent down and everything.”

“It’s actually not that impressive,” she waved off the compliment. “I don’t speak it that much better than I did when I lived there.”

“Well, you spoke it well enough to get over thirty people interested in the Church,” Kevin reminded her. “That’s something.”

That was all Clara had ever wanted: to travel somewhere exotic, learn a new language, and get people interested in the Church. Kevin could remember a time when that had meant something to him, too. It was all he cared about for a time, back when he was her age. Converting people to the Church was more important to Kevin than almost anything: more important than friends or family or romantic interests. It meant the world to him because getting people interested in the Church also meant getting his parents’ approval, their praise, their love. In hindsight, he’s begun to realize that his devotion to the Church wasn’t entirely genuine, but rather a surefire way to receive his parents’ approval. His therapist had helped him to see that. Still, the Church and his faith was all he had when
he was younger, and it sure seemed like enough, at the time.

And even though his opinions on the Church were much different these days, he couldn’t help but feel proud of his little sister. He knew how much it meant to her; knew how important her mission was to her. And she had actually succeeded in doing what she had set out to do. She was making their parents proud. She was doing everything Kevin was supposed to do, and more. But he didn’t feel contempt or jealousy. He was happy for his sister. He was proud. And now she was attending BYU, where she would undoubtedly go on to earn her degree, perhaps even her master’s, with which Kevin hoped she would go on to do something incredible with her life.

But she also had a boyfriend of over three years—a boyfriend who, if he was anything like the other LDS boys his age, would undoubtedly propose to her within the next couple of years, maybe even before they graduated from college. They wouldn’t waste much time after that and would no doubt get busy having children immediately after graduation or, perhaps, even before.

But there was a part of Kevin that wanted more for his little sister. Unlike some of their cousins, Clara was wicked smart, smarter than their parents had ever given her credit for. The problem was: she was also unfailingly kind, willing to please, loved the color pink, and always obeyed her parents’ wishes, no matter what they asked of her. Because of this, people tended to assume she was nothing more than a cookie cutter Mormon girl whose ambitions stopped with marriage and children. Most people never bothered to look beyond the obvious, never bothered to see past her “good Mormon girl” persona. But Kevin knew better.

Of course, she was a good girl with unwavering faith and devotion to the Church. She had been raised in the motherland by Churchgoing Mormon parents—parents whose devoutness nearly bordered on fanaticism at times—but there was another aspect of her personality that most people didn’t get to see, one that gave her a thirst for knowledge and adventure and big dreams and a desire to figure things out for herself. She reminded Kevin of Charlie, sometimes. Perhaps his sister was where Charlie had gotten her seemingly-endless curiosity from. Maybe it was also where she got her love of Barbies and avocados and the color pink. Maybe.

“I have a chance to go back to Germany again next year, you know,” she went on. “For a study abroad program. They might even let me stay with my old district and help the missionaries there.” She shrugged and looked back down to face her carrot. “It’s a great opportunity, but I don’t know if I’ll actually go or not. I’ll have to think about it.”

“That sounds amazing!” Kevin exclaimed. “What’s there to think about?”

His sister shrugged, her lips curling into a soft smile. “Well, things have been getting pretty serious with Jake and I am at the age where getting married is a distinct possibility.” Her smile grew bigger by the second, the longer she thought about it. “I mean, could you even imagine Mom and Dad? They’ll be so proud of me for starting a family right after college.”

“Mom and dad are already proud of you,” Kevin said, his voice turning sad. “You’re all they ever talk about.” He gave her a good-natured kick in the shin. “But, you were always the favorite, so I shouldn’t really be surprised.”

“Oh, please,” Clara rolled her eyes, and kicked him back, only harder. “Do you even know what it’s like to live in the shadow of you two? I am so not the favorite.”

“Are too,” Kevin countered, chucking a potato peel right in her face, making her shriek so loud he had to cover his ears. “Ow!”

Her screeching was loud as all heck, but it never failed to make him laugh, despite its unnaturally
high decibel. It was a happy and familiar sound. Perhaps Charlie had gotten that particular trait from his little sister, as well.

“Gross!” She giggle-shrieked and threw the peel back at him. It bounced off his nose, making him grin, before falling into the garbage can. “And I am not the favorite. Not even close.”

“Well, it sure as heck isn’t me,” Kevin tried to joke, but it just came out sounding bitter. “I can tell you that much.”

Clara’s face fell slightly at his words. He hadn’t meant to dampen the mood, but it was the truth. He hadn’t been the favorite of the family for a very long time. She turned down to face her carrot, staring at it thoughtfully for a moment, her face giving way to the fact that she was trying to think of something she could say to alleviate the mood.

“You gave mom and dad a granddaughter,” she attempted, looking back up to meet Kevin’s eyes. “They adore Charlie. Forget the three of us—she’s the real favorite.”

“Well, that’s true,” Kevin said, because it was. A small consolation, perhaps, but a consolation, nonetheless. “But they didn’t exactly approve of how she came into existence, did they?”

Clara opened her mouth as if to speak, but then promptly shut it. There was no counterargument to make, as Kevin had stated the truth. Clara knew that. So, they continued to sit in what should have been an uncomfortable silence, but it didn’t feel all that uncomfortable. It felt peaceful and familiar. The only sounds that could be heard were the incessant shaving of potato and carrot peels, mixed with the soft murmur of conversation and laughter and yelling coming from inside the kitchen, where his aunts and mother were undoubtedly freaking out over dinner.

“So, how’s your dating life going?” Clara asked a little while later, a cheeky grin on her face. “I’ve noticed you seem a little happier lately. Are you seeing anyone I should know about?”

Yes, Kevin thought to himself without hesitation, but what came out of his mouth was, “Oh, um, no. I’m not seeing anyone. Nobody special, anyway.”

The news seemed to disappoint Clara, who Kevin knew wanted nothing more than to see her older brother find the woman of his dreams and be happy.

“How about you?” He cleared his throat and asked, in an attempt to steer the conversation away from himself. “You mentioned things are going well with John?”

“Jake,” Clara said, rolling her eyes at Kevin’s mistake. “And, yes, things are going… very well.” She sat thoughtfully for a moment as though trying to decide something. “Okay, if I tell you something, do you promise me you won’t tell mom? You have to promise.”

“I promise,” Kevin said. “What’s up?”

“Well, Jake has been dropping a lot of hints lately,” she said, practically squealing as she spoke. “I’m pretty sure he’s going to pop the question soon.”

“Oh, um, wow, that’s—that’s great.”

“I know, isn’t it?”

“But how soon is, um… soon?” Kevin asked, crinkling his brow. “Like… soon-soon?”

“Like, very soon,” she revealed, looking positively giddy. “It’s why I know I can’t do the Germany
thing, even if I wanted to. I mean, I have a chance to married next year! That’s way more important than some trip.”

“But isn’t very soon a little… too soon?” Kevin asked, feeling slightly let down at this news, despite the fact that it should have been expected. “I mean, you’re only twenty-one years old. You have your whole life ahead of you. There will be plenty of time for marriage and kids later. Don’t you want to spend a little more time being… young? Being young and doing things you might never get to do again is important too, you know.”

“I don’t think so.” Clara scrunched her face, looking a bit perturbed that Kevin wasn’t equally as excited about her marriage prospects as she was. “What’s more important than getting married to the person who God has blessed you with? To the person you love and want to start a family with?”

Kevin knew he shouldn’t have been surprised by his sister’s desire for marriage. After all, she was raised the same way he was, went through the same lectures and sermons on the importance of marriage and having a family. But this was his little sister he was dealing with here. The standard rules didn’t apply.

She shook her head and looked down at her carrots. “Besides, we want to do three-in-three before we’re twenty-five, that way we’re young and healthy when our kids are little. That means we have to start within the next two years.”

“Three-in-three?” Kevin’s eyes widened. “What the heck is three-in-three?”

“You know,” Clara rolled her eyes, and gave Kevin’s shin another playful kick. “Three kids in three years.” She laughed, looking confused, as though it should have been obvious. “Duh, Kevin.”

“Oh.” Kevin could feel a blush sweep his cheeks. He didn’t particularly like the mental visualization of his little sister engaging in sexual relations, and especially not with that Jake guy. Kevin had never really liked him. He looked sort of brutish and he heard the guy nearly flunked out of high school. Kevin was honestly surprised he’d even gotten accepted to BYU.

Clara eagerly moved closer to Kevin, silently urging him with her eyes, big, brown and beautiful. “So, what do you think?”

“About what?”

“About having three-in-three,” she pressed, excitedly awaiting his reply. “What do you think?”

“Oh, um,” Kevin stammered, scratching at the back of his head. “I mean, I guess it might be nice for the kids to all be around the same age, but you’re still really young and kids are a lot of work. I mean a lot. I should know, believe me.” He let out a tired sigh. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I love Charlie. She means everything to me. But you’re so young. You still want to go to school and do things before you start having kids, don’t you?”

She shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. But I’ve always wanted a family, Kevin. You know that.”

“No, I know,” he quickly amended. “I’m just saying there’s nothing wrong with waiting a little longer, you know? It’s a lot of work just taking care of one kid, let alone three.”

“Well, Jake wants to have at least three by the time we’re twenty-five,” she explained, happily. “And I think I’d like that too.” She looked out at the trees that encased the back of their yard, little birds singing songs, flitting from tree to tree. The sun was beginning to set over the horizon, casting a pink glow on the pond in the neighbor’s yard. She turned back to Kevin. “I know Mom will be ecstatic, but don’t say anything to her yet, okay? She doesn’t know we’re that serious yet and I kind of want
to surprise her with it. Promise me you won’t say anything?”

Kevin shouldn’t have been surprised at her unwillingness to listen to his advice. Clara had done everything their parents had asked of her all of these years, from who she hung out with to the clothes on her back, so why should getting married at twenty-one and popping out a few kids be any different?

“Don’t worry,” Kevin said, forcing a smile. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Clara leaned back in her chair with an air of contentment. She gazed at Kevin for a long moment, quietly studying him, as though he were a particularly tricky math problem that she was trying to sort out, but couldn’t.

“Have you tried online dating at all?” She asked. “There’s this new app called LDS Singles. Anna and Rachel had a lot of luck finding someone that way.”

Anna and Rachel were their two cousins on their mother’s side. Anna began to fret about not being married at only twenty-two; Rachel was older at twenty-four. They were both engaged now.

“Look, I know that using an app for that sort of thing might seem kinda weird,” she continued. “I totally get it. But it’s really easy to use and everyone on there is looking for the same thing you are.”

The irony of that statement was almost enough to make Kevin laugh out loud, but he refrained. He didn’t want to have to explain himself.

She leaned in and rested a gentle hand to Kevin’s knee. “There are a lot of cute girls on there, you know. You should give it a try.”

“I don’t think so, Clar.” Kevin shook his head. “Online dating isn’t really my thing.”

“Oh, come on,” she insisted, giving Kevin’s knee a squeeze. There was an eagerness to her tone, a near desperation even, that made it clear to Kevin she wasn’t going to let this one go without a fight.

“Oh, I know!” She squealed, tapping excitedly at Kevin’s knee. “I can help you make a profile and everything!” Her eyes lit up at the prospect. “After dinner, okay? We’ll work on it after dinner. Mom doesn’t need to know. We’ll go up to my room and do it there, just you and me.”

“Oh,” Kevin stammered. “No, I really don’t think—”

“But it’ll be so fun!” She wiggled her body excitedly, as though she couldn’t wait to get started on repairing Kevin’s seemingly-hopeless love life. “When’s the last time we did anything fun together, huh?”

Kevin tried to remember, but all he could come up with was the time her, Jack, himself, and Charlie all went camping at Bryce Canyon, to stargaze and grill in one of Utah’s most famous dark sky parks. He had to admit that he did miss his little sister, quite terribly at times, but he didn’t particularly like the idea of his face being available for ogling on some LDS app either. But Clara’s face just looked so excited and happy at the idea of helping her big brother, that he just couldn’t help but say okay.

“Alright, I guess,” he reluctantly conceded. He could always just delete the app later, once he got home. “But the second any weirdos start messaging me, I’m deleting the app. Deal?”

Clara grinned. “Deal.”
Kevin afforded her a half-hearted smile, before turning back down to tend to his potatoes. He didn’t really feel like talking anymore, and especially not about his love life. It had always been difficult for him to lie to Clara.

“I mean, you do want to get married again, don’t you?” Clara asked, sounding uncertain. Despite his best efforts to lie, he supposed the truth was ingrained on his face, somewhere. Kevin looked up to meet her eyes. They were big and innocent. They didn’t look malicious or scornful or judgmental. All he saw was the genuine concern of a little sister who just wanted to see her big brother happy. “I mean, it must get pretty lonely sometimes, doesn’t it? Being alone all the time, just you and Charlie. You have so much love to give, Kevin. I know you do. Don’t you want someone to share it with?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then I really think you just need to put yourself out there, you know? Show these women what a great catch Kevin Price really is.” Her tone was so sincere, it almost hurt. “Imagine how wonderful it would be, for Charlie to grow up with a little brother or sister, just like you did.” Her smile was so wistful, so full of love, so hopeful. “Remember all the fun we used to have together? Don’t you want her to have that?”

Kevin did want his daughter to have that. He wanted her to have a little brother or a little sister to play with, to grow up with, to care for, to give advice to, to play video games with, to share all kinds of experiences with. He wanted her to have it all, very much so. The idea had honestly been churning in the back of his mind ever since his daughter was born. And, lately, with everything moving the way it’s been moving with Connor, he was even starting to entertain the idea that perhaps, one day, the two of them would consider having a child together. Maybe they could adopt or do one of those surrogate things he’d heard so much about, where they take the sperm from a member of the gay couple and the egg from a donor and a surrogate carries the baby. He had to admit that the whole idea sounded pretty out there and far-fetched, but, still, he couldn’t help but smile at the thought of having a little baby who looked just like Connor running around the house. The picture in his head was enough to make a flood of warmth bubble up in his chest.

“Of course I want that,” Kevin answered, honestly. “It’s just…well, I don’t exactly have the best track record with women, that’s all.” He looked deep into Clara’s eyes for a long moment, trying to convey exactly what he meant without using any words. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He wasn’t sure if she’d be able to read between the lines or grasp the subtext of what he was trying to say. He never would find out, either, because his mother poked her head out the door not more than two seconds later, asking them to hurry it up—she had a dinner to make.

“Alright,” Kevin sighed, and gave Clara a weak smile. “Less talking, more peeling.”

Clara met his sad smile with one of her own. “Aye aye, Captain.”

Connor stood there for a few minutes, his chest heaving up and down. He felt stunned—stunned that he would ever allow himself to get so angry, that he’d actually throw his own iPad against the wall. He was trying his best to calm down as he stared out at the mess, horrified by what he’d just done. There were so many pieces of broken glass scattered across the carpet, and so many new questions racing around his brain.
With a sniffle, he wiped at his nose and shakily walked across the room to clean up the mess. He couldn’t have Kevin coming home later—on Christmas Day, of all things—to a sobbing boyfriend and a pile of broken glass on the carpet. He eventually got it together enough to clean it all up, the rush of adrenaline that had been coursing through his veins only minutes before, gradually subsiding with time.

The was no reason to be this upset. Chris was wrong. Connor knew that Chris was wrong. Kevin loved him. Kevin was going to tell his family the truth. Maybe it wouldn’t be today, maybe it wouldn’t be tomorrow, maybe it wouldn’t even be a week from now or a month from now or even a year, but he would tell them, eventually. Connor knew that much to be true. He trusted Kevin to do what he promised and he had promised Connor that he would. And once he did, they wouldn’t need to sneak around anymore or hide or kiss each other only in the darkest corners of the world. Eventually, everything would be as it should be. Connor had faith in that much—he had faith in Kevin. They were so close to the finish line, closer than they’d ever been before. It almost hurt how close. They just needed to make it over this last hump, go just a little bit further down the road, was all.

It was after three o’clock now and Kevin and Charlie were probably getting ready to eat Christmas dinner, he idly thought to himself as he re-hung the photo of Kevin and his siblings back on the wall. It had been hanging slightly crooked before the iPad hit it, half-cocked just a tad to the right, so that was exactly how Connor hung it back up. The crookedness irked him a bit, but he didn’t want there to be any evidence of his transgression. He supposed he should tell Kevin about it, though, once he got home that evening. They had made a pact to be completely honest with each other this time around, about everything. They had promised each other there wouldn’t be any secrets this time, that they would communicate openly and without shame. Connor knew they had to, if this was going to have any chance at working out. Their relationship the first time around was filled with a lot of love, but also a lot of secrets and lies and words left unsaid, and neither one of them wanted to make the same mistake again. Connor would have to tell him, eventually. Perhaps not today, but eventually.

No secrets. No lies. That was the deal.

He showered in Kevin’s too-small shower, trying to wash away his fears with lavender-scented body wash and Dove soap. He felt a little better afterwards. He even smiled a little as he brushed his teeth with the toothbrush Kevin had given him the night before, the one he gave him because Kevin wanted him here. The thought was a comforting one and helped to quell some of the fears implanted by Chris.

He’s never going to tell them about you.

What are you going to do when it’s five years from now, and you’re still spending Christmas like this?

What if you have kids together, Connor? What then?

As Connor pulled one of Kevin’s dark blue sweaters over his head—the soft, fuzzy kind that smelled faintly of Kevin—along with the same pants he’d worn the day before, he had to admit to himself that, although Chris may have amplified his fears with his frankness and honesty, those fears had been there all along, laying dormant in the back of mind, trying not to panic whenever he thought about the future. He had been keeping those unpleasant thoughts buried down, deep into his subconscious, because they were always trying to ruin his happiness. And he was happy, with Kevin.

But the truth was: he would have been even happier if Kevin wasn’t hiding their relationship as though he were ashamed of it; if they weren’t here, in Utah; if Kevin wasn’t still going to Church
every Sunday in order to keep up his false good Mormon man persona. Connor knew the real Kevin Price, and the real Kevin Price hadn’t been that person for a very long time. That was the old Kevin, a Kevin that didn’t exist anymore.

It wasn’t that Connor had anything against Utah. It was his childhood home, after all: his birthplace, filled with memories, both good and bad; and a quite beautiful one, at that. But it was also unbelievably suffocating, these roads and highways and houses and temples serving as a constant reminder of the life he used to lead, the life he had run away from. A false life. A life he had abandoned years ago, after what he liked to think of as his awakening. It had all started back in Uganda and only continued to grow stronger from there. Utah represented everything the old Connor McKinley used to be, and he wasn’t that person anymore. Much like Kevin, he hadn’t been for a very long time.

The problem was that Kevin was here, so that was where he needed to be. Maybe in a few months or a year, once their relationship grew stronger, maybe they’d move in together. Then, perhaps, Connor could hint to Kevin that he’d like to move away. They could sell their homes in Utah and use the money to move closer to New York City. Maybe not in New York City proper, but somewhere close by, close enough so that Connor could resume his career and do everything he loved to do. Close enough so that he could still meet his friends for dinner every once in a while and go see Broadway shows. Somewhere safe, where anonymity prevailed and they wouldn’t get disparaging looks from others; least of all, judgmental Mormons. Somewhere they could make out in public without receiving so much as a second glance.

What good was all of his inheritance money, and his mother’s house, if he couldn’t use them to live his best possible life? His mother may have been gone, leaving a giant gaping hole in his heart that could never be refilled, not even by Kevin, but she had left him with enough so that he didn’t need to worry about money for a while. He could sell his old childhood home and buy an even better one—with Kevin. He and Kevin could pool their money together and move somewhere nice and spacious, to a house where the shower was big and the tub was deep, where they’d have more than one storage closet and a king-sized bed; some place without the stares and whispers of nosy neighbors.

He hated the way all of these thoughts were seeping into what had been his happy place a mere hour before. Shaking his head with a sigh, he slid on his coat and pulled out his brand new set of house keys, the ones Kevin had given him that morning as a way to say: I want you here—all the time.

The memory was enough to push some of those painful thoughts aside. His plan was to go home and get as many clothes as could fit in that drawer, his laptop (now that his iPad was toast), and a couple bottles of wine. He thought about stopping at the liquor store, but was quickly reminded by Google Maps that the closest liquor store was thirty-five minutes away. Connor double-checked twice, just to be completely sure, and, yes, there still wasn’t a nearby liquor store. He’d need to drive into the city just to get a bottle of wine. Mormons.

It was yet another thing to add to his ever-growing list of reasons he missed New York City. As much as he loved being here with Kevin and Charlie—and he did love it—that list was only getting longer with time.

Jack and Kevin were seated beside one another on the loveseat, squished up against one another rather uncomfortably due to the enormous size of their cousin Anna’s fiancé, who was taking up way more than his fair share of the couch. Kevin couldn’t even remember the last time he’d been this
close to Jack—physically, at least—but the amount of Prices jammed into their parents’ modest-sized home made it virtually impossible to get up. Not without risking losing a seat entirely until dinner was served, anyway. Dinner would be ready in about an hour though, so the torture probably wouldn’t go on for too much longer.

“So, how’ve you been?” Kevin asked his brother, keeping his eyes trained on whatever sports was happening on the television. His father kept on flipping between football and tennis and soccer, so it was a little hard to keep track.

“Doing okay,” Jack replied, coolly. He then attempted—unsuccessfully, and for about the tenth time since they’ve been sitting there—to scooch over, so that he wasn’t pressed right up against Kevin’s side, but there was simply no wiggle room. Kevin heard him sigh, presumably at the failure to move over even an inch. “How about you?”

“Good.” Kevin nodded. “I’ve been good. Same old shi—”

He stopped just in time, choking over the word shit, once he realized what he was about to say. His tongue has gotten a bit looser over the past few months he’d been spending with Connor, but he needed to keep it under control around his family.

“Stuff,” Kevin amended. “Same old stuff.” He ran his sweaty palms over the legs of his jeans for about the hundredth time. “Still working at the same place and taking care of Charlie whenever I’m not working. Not very exciting.”

It wasn’t quite a lie. He was still at the same God awful office job and still spent most of his time taking care of Charlie. Of course, he conveniently left out the other person he’d been spending most of his free time with, but that was a conversation for another day.

The two brothers spent the next half an hour in relative silence, both of them pretending to check text messages and social media on their phones, half-heartedly glancing up at the game every so often. Well, Kevin’s glances were half-hearted; Jack actually enjoyed watching sports and every so often would blurt out a comment regarding the state of the game like: Oh, come on, what was that? Or: You call that a pass?

Kevin had no interest, so he just continued awkwardly checking his phone for messages that weren’t really there, until an actual message did come in. And it was from Connor. Thank God.

Miss you, it said. Hope you’re having a nice day with your family. Heart emoji, smiley face.

Kevin’s lips curled into a smile faster than he could process the words. Eager to escape the purgatory that was waiting for dinner, sandwiched between his monosyllabic brother and a goliath with body odor, he eagerly replied. Chatting with Connor was sure to be a happy distraction from what was otherwise turning out to be one of the worst Christmases in recent memory.

I miss you, too, he wrote back. My day kind of sucks, actually. I wish you were here with me.

He kept his eyes trained on the screen, anxiously awaiting a reply. With nothing else to focus his attention on, one minute felt like hours.

Finally, after two long, arduous minute, it came.

I wish I was, too.

The words stung just a little, whether Connor had meant for them to or not. He desperately wanted to talk to someone who wasn’t a nosy aunt or vapid cousin or his brother, however, so he just brushed
the feeling aside. He sent Connor a few pictures of his niece, Bella, and his daughter playing Barbies
together beneath the tree, as well as some shots of his mother’s enormous roasted turkey. Connor’s
replies seemed a bit duller and sadder than usual, prompting some of Kevin’s earlier guilt to seep in.

_I promise it won’t always be like this_, he replied to one of Connor’s one-word answers, repeating his
words from earlier that day. _But I couldn’t tell them today, Connor. Not on Christmas. But I will tell
them soon. I promise._

_I know_, came Connor’s reply. He followed it up with a smiley face and, even though it was just
pixels on a screen, Kevin could somehow tell it was forced.

Deeply engaged in their text conversation—which had, admittedly, taken a more serious turn than he
was expecting—Kevin nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt someone nudge him in the side. It
was Jack, who was literally half-sitting on him at this point, but Kevin had been so absorbed in the
conversation with Connor that he had forgotten to notice.

“What’s this?” His brother mouthed, silently, as he held up his phone.

“How?” Kevin scrunched his face in confusion, before he could even process the image on the
screen. He wasn’t sure what Jack was asking him, his mind was too focused on the messages coming
in from Connor. “What’s what?”

“This,” Jack whispered rather harshly, gesturing to the Facebook photo that was up on his phone.

Kevin’s stomach flip-flopped once his eyes focused on picture, making him instantly forget all about
the text conversation he’d been so invested in only moments before.

On Jack’s screen was the photo of Connor and Charlie, laughing and playing in the ball pit at Chuck-
E-Cheese. It was the photo he had taken the night before, on Christmas Eve—the one he had been
unable to stop staring at all day, whenever he found himself alone. The one he had been thinking
about making his home and lock screen once he got home and was safely out of his family’s sight.
The one he wished he could blow up and hang in his living room, right above the fireplace, for
everyone to see as they entered the house.

The one he could’ve _sworn_ was marked private on Facebook, so that only Arnold, Connor, and the
rest of his mission buddies could see.

Clearly, he fucked that up.

Kevin was momentarily stunned, managing nothing more than an idiotic “Um” in response to Jack’s
question. Time seemed to stand still for the minute it took for Kevin’s brain to catch up with what
was actually _happening_.

Once his brain did catch up, he was still at a loss for words. What could he possibly say? He knew
Jack had recognized Connor. After all, his boyfriend still looked exactly as he had six years prior.
His auburn hair may have been speckled with the faintest bits of gray nowadays, and perhaps he had
a few more laugh lines around his eyes, but Connor’s face still looked happy and freckled and
youthful, just as it had all those years ago.

No, he knew darn well that Jack had recognized that face—the face of a home-wrecker, a life-ruiner
(at least, in the eyes of his parents); the face Kevin’s father had called a _faggot_, and accused of
turning Kevin into one as well. The face that nearly destroyed his good-standing with the Church
and his family. The face that made Jack stop respecting him as his brilliant and determined older
brother and, instead, replaced that respect with pity and disappointment.
“It’s, um—it’s not what you think,” Kevin mustered out, once the ability to speak had come back to him. He swallowed hard, trying to focus on sounding confident, as though he were in perfect control of the situation. “I can explain.”

But he didn’t sound confident or in control. He sounded scared and unconvincing, fumbling over the words as though they were foreign to him. He knew how he must have sounded, and he knew Jack did, too, so he began racking his brain for a lie—any lie—that would get him out of this. A lie that would let his brother know it wasn’t what it looked like (even though it was exactly what it looked like).

When he finally opened his mouth and uttered Connor’s name, however, his brother quickly shushed him up, whispering harshly and covering Kevin’s mouth with his hand.

He had done this, presumably, so that their father and cousins wouldn’t overhear the word vomit that was about to come spewing out of Kevin’s mouth. When Kevin went to open his mouth again—probably to say something stupid—his brother shot up off the couch and not-so-gently pulled Kevin up with him, dragging him down the hallway and into the now-vacant bedroom they used to share as kids.

Shocked at the sudden turn of events, Kevin accidentally left his phone on the coffee table. He just couldn’t think straight, not with his stomach hurting as much as it did, not with his brain running a mile a minute. As Jack pulled him into the bedroom and shut the door behind them, Kevin keeled over against the bed frame, nearly vomiting all over the new bedroom set their mother had bought for the “guest room”.

He had to think of a lie—any lie—and fast, or else he might end up coming out to his family on Christmas Day, after all.

Connor had wine now, at last. Because of the widespread prevalence of Mormonism in Utah, he had been forced to drive about thirty or forty minutes out of the way just to find a liquor store (and one that was opened on Christmas Day—not an easy feat), but it wasn’t like he had anything else to do that day, anyway, so his losses were minimal.

In New York City, all he had to do to pick up a bottle of wine was go downstairs. He lived above a Whole Foods in the Lower East Side, where there was always a huge selection of organic wines to choose from, and he could pick up his weekly groceries there too, while he was at it. Next to Whole Foods was his laundromat and next to the laundromat was his local coffeehouse, where he got every tenth cup free and the barista knew his order by heart: double espresso and a savory scone. His life there had been easy, convenient; exciting, yet predictable. He supposed it was probably weird, feeling so homesick for a place that wasn’t even his birth home, but it had been his home for the past several years. In some ways, New York City felt more like home to him than South Jordan, Utah ever would.

He had brought some clothes and toiletries back with him to Kevin’s house: a few sets of pajamas, a couple tee shirts and several pairs of jeans. He neatly folded the clothes and placed them in his new drawer. He hung his keys on the key holder in the kitchen, alongside the keys to Kevin’s garage. He was trying to focus on Kevin’s words from earlier that day, instead of on the seeds of doubt and confusion planted by Chris: I want you here, and not just when it’s convenient—all the time.
Connor knew that the gift of Kevin’s drawer meant something, something real; that it meant more than all of the drawers he’d had in various men’s apartments back in New York City. He also knew how difficult it probably was for Kevin to hand over his spare set of keys, giving Connor free reign of his home. It really did amaze Connor how far Kevin had come in just a short amount of time. He was progressing. He was healing. Therapy was helping. **Connor** was helping. It was working—all of it—just as they had planned.

He knew all of this, and yet Chris’s words still plagued him.

He sent Chris a half-hearted apology over text after he cleaned up the broken glass. Chris sent him a half-hearted apology back. He knew they would be okay, eventually. They were always okay. But this particular fight had been worse than others and Connor knew he probably wouldn’t be hearing from Chris for a few days. That was perfectly alright with Connor, though, as Chris had already given him too much to think about, as it was.

It was cold outside, but the snowfall had let up a bit and Connor desperately wanted to escape the confines of the house. He wasn’t sure if it was the plethora of photos of Kevin’s family hanging on the walls. He hadn’t realized until now how many there were. They were everywhere, seemingly staring at him; mocking him, telling him he would never be a part of their world—not really, anyway. Or maybe it was the oppressive heat coming from the uncontrollable radiator, the one that wouldn’t seem to shut off no matter how many times he tried. Whatever it was, Connor didn’t want to sit there anymore, watching reality television and feeling sorry for himself.

He bundled up, poured himself a glass of pinot noir, and retreated out to Kevin’s front porch with his Kindle, phone and Scrabble board in hand. He was starting to understand why Kevin liked it out here so much, sitting on the porch. It was peaceful and quiet, especially on days like this one. Snow always seemed to quiet everything, the layers of white powder muffling the sounds of footsteps, coating the world like a pair of sound-proof headphones.

There were a few houses sitting to the left and right of Kevin’s, but behind the porch laid his backyard, followed by a beautiful stretch of trees. Other than Kevin’s neighbor—her name was Nell, if Connor remembered correctly—sitting on her own porch in an uncomfortably close proximity to Connor, the mood and surroundings were quite serene. He set his wine glass and bottle on the snow-covered table, the blood-red of the liquid contrasting against the snowy white table, looking almost like a painting. He popped his headphones in and pretty soon the gentle melody of a Mozart sonata filled his ears. He had a bit of an eclectic playlist consisting of classical, 80s’ punk, and 1960s’ girl groups. With a long sigh, he kicked his feet up on the ottoman and tried his best to concentrate on the book in his hands.

This life wasn’t so bad, he thought. He could do this life, even if it did take Kevin a little longer than he’d hoped to come around to telling his family. Even if years ended up going by before Kevin was ready to move closer to New York. With the exception of the neighbor, Nell, giving him funny looks every now and again, it was beginning to pan out to be a perfectly lovely Christmas afternoon.

“**I thought that guy moved to New York years ago?**” Jack asked, placing a gentle hand to Kevin’s back. “**So, what’s he doing with your daughter in a—**ball pit?”

The gentleness of his brother’s touch surprised him. It also surprised him that he couldn’t detect any amount of disgust of contempt in his voice. He just sounded…**concerned**. He and Jack weren’t
exactly what you’d call close these days, so that certainly came as a surprise.

Perhaps Kevin would have told him that, if he could get a word out. But the panic had already set in and he found he could no longer speak. Everything hurt too much to speak. His neck, his chest, his eyes—everything.

“Kevin,” Jack sighed, tapping at Kevin’s back, to try to get him to stand up. He was still in a rather languished position of being keeled over their mother’s new bedframe, clutching at his stomach and trying to take deep breaths. “Kevin—Kevin, you need to just calm down, okay? You’re starting to hyperventilate or something.”

If Kevin wasn’t breathing normally, it wasn’t for lack of trying. He was trying his hardest to take slow, deep breaths, but all that would come out were manic gasps for air. The problem was that Arnold wasn’t here. He usually had Arnold or Connor or someone else who loved him to help guide him through episodes like these, to talk him down from the ledge, to tell him that everything would be okay, that nothing was ever as bad as it seems. But he only had Jack this time around and, as much as he could tell his brother was trying to be tactful, he certainly wasn’t any Arnold or Connor.

“Kevin,” Jack huffed, sounding rather annoyed now as he yanked Kevin up from his position and forced him to stand. Kevin’s body felt raw and limp and used and he couldn’t hear very well. His head felt like it was being rapidly filled with compressed air. His ears were ringing.

“I can’t,” Kevin gasped for breath. He clutched behind him at the bedframe as he tried to muster out just a few words, but his throat hurt too much and his chest. It felt tight. Too tight. Like it might explode any second.

“I’m sorry,” Kevin finally managed to muster out, slamming his eyes shut in embarrassment. “It just happens sometimes. I can’t always control it. I can’t—”

He finally managed to take in a deep breath, and tried to think only happy thoughts. He thought about Charlie and how her face had looked their first day at Disney; how big she had smiled when Kevin took her on It’s a Small World for the third time in a row. The way she shoved an entire cone of chocolate ice cream into her face and the way she thanked him for taking her to the most magical place in the whole world. He tried his hardest to think of nothing else but that day. Nothing else even existed except for that day. It was a little trick his therapist had taught him to help him try and control his panic attacks and, after a minute or two, it started to work. His throat began to hurt a little less, the tightness in his chest let up, and he was able to finally get a word out without gasping violently for air.

He reluctantly looked up to meet Jack’s gaze, embarrassed and ashamed over the scene he’d just made. Jack had never seen him have a panic attack before, as it usually only happened whenever Kevin was alone or with someone he trusted like Arnold or Connor or Nabulungi. Very rarely did his family ever see him like that, mostly because he always made sure they didn’t, until now.

“Kevin?” His brother asked gently. “What’s going on?”

“It’s not what you think,” Kevin stammered, once his voice came back to him. “Connor, he’s—he’s only back in Utah because his mother died. She passed away a few months ago and he’s still really shaken up about it.”
“I’m sorry to hear that, Kevin. I really am,” Jack said, calmly. “But that still doesn’t explain this.” He held up the photo in question, making Kevin’s stomach drop again. Every time Jack showed him the photo, Kevin felt himself die a little inside.

Such a happy memory, tainted, all because he forgot to hit the wrong button in the stupid privacy settings on a stupid fucking app. He shouldn’t have posted the photo in the first place. He knew that, now—hindsight was 20/20, after all—but goddammit, he wanted to. He wanted to. It was as simple as that. Maybe he hadn’t been thinking straight. Maybe his judgment was clouded. Emotional lows and highs tended to do that to him. But part of him simply wanted to be playful, to have some fun for a change, to give Connor a good-natured teasing by posting a cute, semi-embarrassing picture of him rolling around the ball pit at Chuck-E-Cheese with a five-year-old. Another part of him, the part of him not many people got to see, wanted his mission buddies to see the photo. He wanted them to know how happy he was with Connor, how happy were they together, how far they’d come since their Disney trip. His fellow ex-missionaries were the only people in the world who he was “out” to, and the photo was meant for their eyes alone.

What a dumb, costly mistake he’d made, he thought to himself bitterly as he stared at the photo in Jack’s hand. Now he would be forced to either lie or come out to his family on Christmas Day. Neither choice was very appealing. He had to think fast. How could he get out of this? He had to make something up, something believable, something that would spare him the pain and embarrassment of the truth.

“Kevin,” Jack sighed, the hand that was holding the phone falling tiredly against his side, as though even having this conversation with Kevin was exhausting every last ounce of energy he had left. “Don’t lie to me, okay? If you’re slipping up again, if you’re sinning with that man, then just tell me, alright?”

Kevin was quiet for a moment, his stomach clenched into knots, and it took everything he had not to succumb to another bout of panic.

“We can get you help, okay?” Jack offered, a hand to the shoulder. “You don’t need to face this alone. I mean it. Bishop Matthews literally just helped my friend Jeremy with the same problem last —”

“It’s not like that,” Kevin said, cutting him off rather forcefully. He swallowed hard to try and formulate his next words. “He just… he just needed a friend, that’s all. We started talking again during our Disney trip and then his mother died three months later.” It wasn’t a lie. He wasn’t lying. “He doesn’t have any close friends or family here in Utah, so I just… offered to help, that’s all.” That wasn’t a lie, either. The lie would need to come next. He paused a moment to try and collect his words without vomiting all over Jack’s holiday sweater. “But that’s it. We’re not—” He stared into Jack’s disbelieving eyes, praying that his own wouldn’t betray him. “I’m not like that anymore,” he repeated. “I haven’t been for a long time.”

“Oh—” Jack didn’t look as though he believed him, but he gave him a small nod, nonetheless. “If you say so."

“I do,” Kevin spat, running a shaky hand through his hair, floppy and damp from sweat. “I do say so."

“I’m just asking you to be careful, okay?” Jack warned, his eyes piercing into Kevin’s as though he could see right through them and into his soul. “Spending so much time with someone like that… someone who openly and proudly defies the Gospel, who sins against Heavenly Father without any remorse whatsoever… that isn’t the kind of person you should be hanging out with. He could tempt you, seduce you, and you don’t want to go back down that road again. Especially not after you’ve
worked so hard to fight those feelings.”

“He’s not going to tempt me,” Kevin huffed angrily, trying to sound disgusted by the notion. “I’m not like that anymore. I’ve told you that a thousand times, haven’t I? Why don’t you believe me, huh? I’m not like that. I’m not—”

“You might not be, but he still is,” Jack reminded him, and Kevin could tell he still didn’t quite believe his story. He almost did, but not quite. “And after everything you’ve done to turn your life around, after everything you’ve accomplished, I’d just hate to see you throw all that away again, that’s all.”

Kevin had to think of something—anything—to make Jack believe him, to convince him that there was nothing to worry about, before the damage done was irreversible, before this news made its way up the family gossip chain to his mother and father and aunts and uncles. He had to make something up, and fast. Something believable. Something the old Kevin would have thought of.

“Connor,” Kevin stammered. “Connor, he, um—he’s actually been looking to me for spiritual guidance. That’s why we’ve been spending so much time together. After his mother died, he just… fell apart, you know? He needed God in his life, to steer him back on the right path.” He swallowed, to try and suppress the vomit that was itching its way up his throat. “We’ve been studying scripture together for a while now and he, um—he even told me he might be interested in coming back to the Church.” He paused a moment, to try and gauge Jack’s reaction. “So, you can believe me when I say there’s nothing going on, okay? This is just a case of an old friend helping another old friend find his way back to God. Nothing more, nothing less.”

It hurt Kevin to say the words aloud. They felt so false on his tongue that it almost burned, as though he were committing blasphemy. He loved Connor. He loved Connor with his whole heart, and saying those things—lying like this—was letting Connor down, in a way. He knew that. It was enough to chip away at all of the happiness he was feeling not even hours before.

He knew he’d end up replaying the lie in his head for the rest of the day, making himself sick to his stomach every time he did. He had taken five steps forward only to take three steps back. He wasn’t living up to the promises he’d made. He was falling back into the same old trap that had engulfed him years before. He was supposed to be better than this now, wasn’t he? He wasn’t supposed to be scared, wasn’t supposed to lie. He was supposed to be strong—for Connor, for Charlie, for himself. His little family was depending on him to be strong, and he was failing them.

Nodding with approval, Jack rested a hand to Kevin’s shoulder, looking at though he finally believed Kevin’s words. “I’m proud of you, Kev,” he said, and it almost sounded earnest. “You’re doing the Lord’s work.”

Kevin nodded and gave Jack the closest thing he could muster to a smile. Jack finally believed him, it was over, but his victory just felt empty and hollow. And the worst part of all of this was the fact that he’d have to tell Connor all about it, later.

No secrets. No lies.

Secrets had broken their relationship the first time around, and Kevin couldn’t let that happen again. Not this time around. He had far too much to lose this time, if he did.
An hour or two had passed since he’d been on the porch, and Connor was trying to keep his focus on the novel in his hands, but the woman’s gaze on him was starting to get creepier and creepier the longer he sat there. It was piercing and unrelenting. She also seemed to be moving closer and closer to him, as though she were inching her chair over in his direction, towards edge of the porch. The entire scenario was starting to make him feel more than a little uncomfortable and, finally, Connor had had enough.

He pulled his earbuds out and took a long swig of his wine—maybe it would provide some liquid courage or something—before getting up and walking to the other side of the porch. He leaned over the side of the rail and sent the woman his best glare.

“Excuse me,” he said, confidently, and with as much authority as he could muster. “Do you need help with something?” He waited for her to answer, to say something, but nothing ever came. “Because you’ve been staring at me for over two hours now.”

The woman didn’t say anything for a while, but eventually she made a face and mumbled something under her breath.

“If you don’t need anything, could you please stop staring at me like that?” He asked, his tone laced with an unexpected amount of anger. The woman must have been bothering him more than he realized. “It’s rude and creepy and I would really appreciate it if you could knock it off.”

The woman then got up and hobbled back into her house. Her two cats trailed after her, one of them letting out a rather sad meow as the door shut behind her.

“Fucking crazy people,” he muttered under his breath and shook his head, confused.

He didn’t want to get Kevin into any kind of ridiculous drama with his neighbors over this incident, but she was the one being rude, not him. He tried to shrug it off as best he could, but the look of scorn and disdain on the woman’s face set his teeth on edge.

New York City certainly had its flaws—okay, so maybe it had a lot of flaws. It was dirty and depressing and there were a lot of homeless people sleeping on the subway, but it also afforded Connor the gift of anonymity. There were no nosy neighbors, no curious gazes or stares, no worrying about what other people were doing or what they might think. Instead, there was a certain level of acceptance. The unspoken rule was: if you minded your own business, then everyone else minded theirs. In New York City, Connor could walk around being as gay and happy and proud as he wanted to be, drinking wine and wearing too-tight pants, and no one would even think twice about it. No one cared. And that kind of acceptance was something he knew he would never have here.

No, in small towns such as this one, where the population was about ninety-percent Church-going Mormons, much like where Connor had grown up, everyone watched each other like hawks. It sometimes felt as though people were just waiting for an excuse to expose their neighbor for some kind of wrongdoing, to uncover a piece of hot, small town gossip and besmirch the person’s good name. In towns like this, everyone knew everything about what everyone else was doing. You knew who so-and-so was fucking or fighting with or cheating on their significant other with. You knew who went to Church and who didn’t. And since Kevin had spent the majority of the past few years in virtual isolation, save for the occasional visit from his immediate family and Arnold, his neighbors were bound to find the sudden appearance of a red-haired man in his late twenties, who listens to Mozart and drinks wine in the snow, wearing pants that are just a little too tight and doesn’t go home sometimes until five o’clock in the morning, to be a rather sudden and strange development. There was bound to be neighborhood talk about it, eventually. They were being sloppy with Kevin’s secret.
Maybe the woman next door wasn’t bigoted or judgmental or condescending. Maybe Connor was just being irrationally defensive because of events that had occurred in his own life. Billy Jones who used to humiliate him in sixth grade by making him use the ladies’ room. He had bigger muscles and could punch better than Connor could, so he always just took it. The bishops who tried to convince him that something was wrong with him. The self-doubt and self-disdain that had been pounded into him from a very young age. He had learned from experience to expect the worst in people. Maybe the old woman was just confused and curious about the stranger who had suddenly appeared in Kevin Price’s life, doing odd things like drinking wine and staying over until the crack of dawn. Or, perhaps, she was simply old and senile and couldn’t even remember her own name. It was a distinct possibility, all things considered.

Connor didn’t know the reason. All he knew was that he really didn’t like the way she was looking at him, as though he were some kind of strange anomaly that needed to be studied, or looked at under a microscope. It was the kind of look he thought he’d left behind in Utah many years ago, when he made a break for New York City. He had already escaped this life once, and he wasn’t exactly looking forward to living it again, now.

If the situation had been different, if things weren’t what they were, Connor would have already sold his mother’s house in South Jordan and moved back to New York City. He would have already settled back into his old life of going to brunch and Broadway shows with his friends; going on auditions and trying to make his shoebox-sized apartment more comfortable and livable. And he would have done all of it with a hefty inheritance in his bank account.

But New York City didn’t have one very important thing: it didn’t have Kevin, which meant Connor McKinley would be stuck in Utah for at least a little while longer.

“Okay, so I downloaded the app,” Clara said giddily as she clicked the LDS Singles icon on Kevin’s phone. “First, we need to find you a good profile picture. Let’s see here.”

Kevin went to grab the phone out of her hands before she had a chance to click into his photo gallery, but it was already too late. A flood of photos had already filled the screen faster than he could stop it. Most of them were of Connor and Charlie. His stomach instantly clenched, and he knew he was going to have to lie again.

His sister’s brow creased for a moment as she stared at the screen. Kevin felt the urge to rip the phone from her hands, but that would make everything seem even more suspicious. When she looked up from the screen and met his eyes, he could tell she didn’t really suspect anything, but she was undoubtedly curious and confused.

Without saying anything on the matter, she forced a smile and turned back down to the phone. Then she scrolled and scrolled and scrolled through the pictures, but they were all either of Connor or Charlie.

“Wow, you really have a lot of pictures of this guy,” she observed, once the silence had gone on for too long. “Who is he?”

“Oh, he’s, um,” Kevin stammered. “He’s just a friend.”

“A friend?” Clara looked surprised. “I thought your only friend was that Arnold guy and his wife.”
“An old friend,” Kevin clarified. “A very old friend. I’m, um… I’m helping him with his faith. We’ve been studying scripture together, things like that. Scroll down a little further, there should be some good ones of me at Disney.”

Clara nodded, not giving any hint that she didn’t believe him, and smiled once she landed on a picture of Kevin, standing in front of Cinderella’s Castle at Disney with Charlie balanced on his hip.

“This one is perfect.” She grinned and held the photo up for Kevin to see. “I’m making this your profile picture, so if you have any objections, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

“I have no objections,” Kevin said softly, tightening his grip on Clara’s shoulders and pulling her into his side. She rested her head against his shoulder, and her hair smelled like fall leaves and lavender. “It’s perfect.”

He had to admit that he did look pretty cute in that photo. He was smiling so wide and his light blue Disney shirt and khaki shorts fit him rather well. His hair was sunlit and windblown. Charlie looked adorable and sweet, per usual. Clara was absolutely right: it was the perfect picture. It captured the essence of who Kevin was on the inside, while still highlighting some of his more physical attributes. It was almost too bad he’d be deleting the profile as soon as he got home. Almost.

He and Clara spent the next half hour filling out his profile, mostly with a lot of groans and head shakes from Kevin. He had to at least pretend to care what she put in, just to keep up appearances, but he didn’t really. It was all just for show, so what did it matter? The profile wasn’t real. He had no interest in finding a good Mormon girl. But, he couldn’t tell his sister that—not with that gigantic smile on her face and sparkle in her eyes. She thought she was helping out her big brother and, in a way, he supposed she was. He felt safe with his sister, lying in her childhood bed in her childhood room that was filled with far too much pink, laughing and talking and play-punching each other like children. It was nice. It was the kind of moment he was afraid he wouldn’t have anymore, once she found out the truth.

What would she think of him, once she knew he had been lying to her all these years? Once she knew he didn’t really believe in the Mormon teachings anymore? Once she knew he was in love with a man and had no intention of stopping? Would she keep on loving him anyway? Would she come over and babysit Charlie on weekends while he and Connor went away on short, romantic getaways? Or would she become closed off and distant, unable to accept the life of sin her big brother had chosen?

Kevin loved his sister. He loved her with his whole heart. He just hoped she’d still love him just as much, once she knew the truth.

Christmas dinner was fine, but it didn’t taste half as good as Kevin remembered it tasting last year or the year before. He had lost his appetite, anyway. There were too many things to worry about, now. Charlie could let his secret slip any day now. He lied to Jack. He lied to his sister. He lied to his mother, once the news of Kevin’s “friend” made its way up the food chain in a timespan of just two hours. And now, he supposed, he’d have to lie to Connor.

None of this was working out the way it was supposed to.

He stayed for dessert and forced himself to try and enjoy his mother’s chocolate cream pie, the one
she only made once a year on Christmas Day, but it didn’t taste as good as he remembered. He
packed up a slice for Connor, telling his mother he wanted an extra slice for tomorrow.

Another lie. A small one, perhaps, but it felt enormous. Too many small lies were beginning to pile
up.

The problem was that he was so good at lying and it was easier to do, rather than face the
consequences of the truth. He knew he would need to work up enough courage to tell them,
eventually. He had to. He may have taken three steps back today, but he would take ten steps
forward tomorrow. Well, maybe not literally tomorrow, but one day—once he was ready. When that
would end up being, he still had no idea.

He didn’t get home until a little after ten o’clock at night. The moment he walked through the door,
he flopped back on the couch and closed his eyes. He felt tired, and defeated. He felt Charlie climb
up onto his belly and park her head against his chest. Without thinking, he reached up and curled an
arm over her body and kissed the top of her curls. At least he had his little girl. That was the most
important thing. And he had Connor. Where was Connor, anyway?

He opened his eyes and cocked his head to the side, so he could peer through the kitchen and out
onto the porch. It was dark outside, but Kevin could see the top of Connor’s head sticking up
through the window, his light, auburn hair contrasting against the blackness of the night sky. The
white lights they’d strung up around the porch ceiling last week were turned on, making his hair sort
of glow. He liked it whenever Connor glowed. A part of him couldn’t wait to wrap his arms around
Connor the moment they were alone together, throw him down on the bed, and kiss him until their
lips turned blue. But another part of him just wanted to go to sleep. It had been a long day and,
despite looking forward to their late night alone time, he just wasn’t sure he could muster up the
energy for it. His entire body felt spent. Visiting his parents’ house had taxed him, both mentally and
physically, and he wasn’t sure if he was really up for having sex tonight. Not anymore, not after all
that.

“Okay, kiddo,” he said to Charlie as he sat up, pulling her up into his arms. “We have to get you to
bed.”

He let Charlie run upstairs to pick out her nightgown, giving him a chance to go check on Connor
and let him know they were home. He slid the glass door opened to find Connor sitting outside on
the porch in the freezing cold, book in his hand and headphones in his ears, feet kicked up on a
snowy ottoman. The air smelled crisp, but it was far too cold to be spending any significant amount
of time out there. And, of course, Connor didn’t have enough layers on. He never did. He seemed to
be absorbed in whatever he was reading and there was a Scrabble board with a half-played game
sitting on the table, alongside a mostly-empty bottle of wine.

“Hey,” Kevin said, sitting down beside him and resting a hand to his shoulder.

Connor jumped at the touch, startled. “Jesus. A warning would have been nice.”

“Sorry,” Kevin said, softly. “I just wanted to let you know we were home.” He glanced around at the
table, eyeing the half-played Scrabble board that looked to be set up for two. He raised an eyebrow.
“Are you seeing someone else I should know about?”

“No,” Connor said, rolling his eyes. He circled his arms around Kevin’s neck and pressed their noses
together. “I just like playing against myself sometimes.”

“You know, they have this little app. It’s called Words with Friends, and it lets you play against
actual people.” He grinned when Connor rolled his eyes again. “You can even play against robots.”
“Yes, I’m aware of the existence of *Words with Friends*, Kevin.”

“All I’m saying is: it might be more exciting than playing against yourself.”

“Not for me it isn’t,” Connor said. “I need to *feel* the physical letters between my fingers.”

Kevin laughed, and he could feel his eyes going soft. “Only you would spend Christmas Day playing *Scrabble* against yourself outside in the freezing cold.”

“Well, it’s not like I had anything else to do,” Connor unexpectedly snapped. The words took Kevin back a bit, and it didn’t take long for Connor’s eyes to turn instantly apologetic. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—I didn’t mean anything by that. I know why I couldn’t come with you today. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay,” Kevin whispered, and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “It’s okay even if you did.”

“I think we need to talk, or something?” Connor said, sounding uncharacteristically unsure of himself. “You know, about—about this. About us.”

Kevin’s stomach dropped with a thud, but he nodded, nonetheless.

He had a pretty good guess as to what Connor meant—what *this* was they had to *talk about*. But it was all getting rather complicated now that he had lied to his entire family about the nature of their relationship. Should he tell Connor about the lie? Or should he lie about the lie? Would the truth make Connor angry? Would it ruin everything they had built over the past few months? Or would he simply nod and understand, smiling that beautiful Connor smile and say *everything’s okay*? And if he did get angry, *how* angry would he get? Angry enough to end things?

Kevin took a moment to really *look* at Connor. He looked almost as tired as Kevin felt. Something was definitely wrong.

“I have to put Charlie to bed,” Kevin eventually said. “Then we can… *talk*, okay?”

Connor nodded, and Kevin left to put Charlie to bed. She put up a pretty good fight, of course. It was Christmas and she just wanted to stay up late and play with her new toys. Eventually, though, she allowed her daddy to read her a quick bedtime story—*Mickey’s Birthday Party*, the shortest one he could find—and agreed that she should probably get some sleep. Her eyes were already closed when he kissed her goodnight. Before closing the door, he stood in the doorway for a moment or two, simply watching her sleep. He closed the door without making a sound, and braced himself for his and Connor’s inevitable *talk*.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Kevin asked, reaching across the messy Scrabble board to take Connor’s hand. They were still outside on the porch, sitting across from each other. It was cold, but he didn’t really mind. “Did something happen while I was out? You don’t look so good.”

“Gee, thanks.” Connor rolled his eyes, taking a sip from his wine glass with his free hand.

Kevin’s lip curled upward. “You know what I meant.”

“I know,” Connor said, setting his glass back down. He stared at it thoughtfully. “I just… didn’t have
a very good day, that’s all.”

“T’m sorry,” Kevin said, meaning it. He had tried to make up for everything by giving him the drawer and the keys earlier that morning, but it was clear now that none of that was enough. He gave Connor’s hands a squeeze and tried to apologize. “I should’ve just stayed home with you today. I’m sorry.”

“Kevin, that’s not—“

“I could’ve made up some lame excuse about Charlie being sick or something,” he continued. “I’m really, really sorry.”

“Kevin,” Connor said, gently cutting him off. “It’s not that. I mean, yes, it is that, but it’s not just that.”

“It’s not?”

“No.” Connor looked nervous as he tried to gather his next words. “I, um—I talked to Chris today. We had a… talk.” He paused a moment. “Like, a talk-talk.”

“Okay.” Kevin crinkled his brow. He wasn’t exactly sure what a talk-talk entailed. “About?”

“About us. About how we, you know,” Connor said, lightening the mood by affording Kevin a flirty smile. “Last night. I told him about last night.”

Kevin blushed, his eyes darting away from Connor’s. “A little personal, but okay.”

“He’s my best friend, Kevin,” Connor rolled his eyes. “What do you expect? Anyway, he said some things to me, after I told him. Things that were a little difficult for me to hear, but really made me start to think.”

Kevin could feel himself start to sweat. Where was this going? What was Connor trying to get at? He tried to speak without stuttering, but it was a lost cause. “What, um—what kinds of things?”

Connor was quiet for a moment, as though dreading saying what he was about to say. Kevin was dreading it, too.

“About how you’re still keeping us in the closet, and how that might be affecting me. I mean, I’m not in the closet. I’m talking about you and me—as how you’re still hiding… us. From your family, from everyone.” He glanced down at their intertwined hands, pausing a moment before going on. “And I just… I need to know that it isn’t always going be this way, you know? That you have a plan for the future. A plan that doesn’t include leaving me alone on Christmas to spend it the way I did today.”

“You already know why it’s so hard for me to tell them,” Kevin said, his voice beginning to sound desperate and shaky. “You know why.” He didn’t want to be having this conversation. This conversation wasn’t supposed to be happening for at least another six months, maybe more. It wasn’t supposed to be happening today, on Christmas. “We’ve talked about this. You told me you understood. We had a deal, remember? You told me I could take my time, and now you’re sitting here and telling me I have to—”

“No, no, no,” Connor cooed, moving his hand to cup Kevin’s cheek. “I’m not telling you to do anything. Just calm down, okay?”

Kevin could feel his mouth run dry. “You told me you understood. You told me I could take my
time. And now you’re—"

“I do understand, and you can take your time.”

“Then why are you saying this right now?”

Connor sighed. He knew how hard this was going to be. Kevin always panicked, about everything. It made it very difficult to have an honest conversation with him.

“Because as much as I understand what you’re going through, what you’ve been through, I can’t ignore the fact that it’s… affecting me, Kevin. Not being able to hold your hand in public. Not being able to kiss you at dinner. Not being able to post pictures of us on Instagram being happy and having fun.” He squeezed Kevin’s hand, to try and make him calm down. “As stupid as all of that sounds—and I know how stupid it sounds—it still… hurts me. I walk around feeling like you’re ashamed to be seen with me when all I want to do is shout it as loud as I possibly can. I want to tell the whole goddamn world about us. So, as much as I understand why this is so hard for you, as much as I feel your pain, I can’t help the way I feel.”

“And Chris,” Kevin said. “He’s the one who made you… realize all this?” His voice wavered as though he was on the verge of tears. “What exactly did he say about me?”

“That’s not important,” Connor said, trying to relax him by gently rubbing his hand with his thumb. “He just helped me realize that maybe I’ve been… trying not to see what I don’t want to see, that’s all.”

“And that is…?”

“That I can’t exist like this forever, Kevin. It’s too hard for me. The lying and the hiding and the not knowing what the future is going to look like. A part of me is terrified that it might end up being like this forever, and I can’t—I can’t do that. This can’t be my life.”

“It won’t be forever,” Kevin promised. “I won’t let it. I love you. I want you to be happy. I want us to be happy.”

“I know,” Connor said. “But sometimes I get scared that right now is going to last a really long time, that’s all. And then before we know it, we’ll be thirty or forty or fifty and I don’t want to still be spending Christmas like… this.”

“That isn’t going to happen,” Kevin promised. “I won’t let it. I love you. I want you to be happy. I want us to be happy.”

“I know you believe that,” Connor said, and he was trying to sound as gentle as possible. “But I have a hard time believing it when I don’t even know when you’re even planning to tell them. Are you thinking two months from now? Two years? I just need to know the plan.”

“What happened to trusting me?” Kevin asked, and Connor could see a tear spilling out of his eye. “And letting me take my time? Is that all out the window now, just because of some off-handed comment from Chris?”

“Of course not,” Connor stressed, relinquishing the hold on his hands so he could cup Kevin’s cheeks. “I’m never going to rush you, Kevin. I promised you I wouldn't and I'm not one for breaking promises.” He paused a moment and bit his lip. “I just… I just have to know that you will tell them, eventually, that’s all.” He gazed into Kevin’s eyes with as much honesty and vulnerability as he could muster. “Because I don’t want the rest of my life to be like this… like today. I can’t live the
rest of my life like this. So, just... please promise me you will tell them, and not so far in the future that we won’t be able to enjoy the rest of our lives together. That's all I'm asking you to do.”

“I will. I promise,” Kevin said, his eyes welling up with tears. He glanced down to face Connor’s chest, as though embarrassed by whatever he was about to say. “It’s just really hard, you know? Even the thought of telling them makes me sick to my stomach, because I know exactly what’s going to happen when I do.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Connor softly assured him. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do,” Kevin said, tears dripping down his cheeks. “They’re going to stop talking to me just like they threatened to do the last time this happened, if I didn’t get help. I know they are. I know it.”

Keeping a hand pressed against Kevin’s cheek, Connor got up and moved around the table so that he was sitting beside him. He put his arms around Kevin’s neck and pushed their foreheads together.

“Listen to me, Kevin. Are you listening to me?” Connor asked. Kevin nodded, through a bout of sniffles. “I’m going to be here for you, every step of the way. If you don’t know anything, just please know that, okay? Whatever happens, whatever they say, whatever they do, I’ll be right there by your side. I’ve been through this before. I know how hard it is. I know how scary it can feel. And I promise you that I will hold your hand through all of it.”

“I know that.” Kevin gave him a weak smile. “I know that. It's just... they're my parents, Connor. I love them. I know I probably shouldn’t love them after everything they put me through, but I do. Even my dad, as awful as he was to us. And my brother and my sister...” He could barely get the words out without tearing up. “I don’t think I could bear it if they just... if they never wanted to see me again.” Another sniffle. “I just couldn’t bear it.”

He lost whatever else he was about to say to a horrific-sounding sob. Connor pulled him in, letting him bury his wet cheeks into his neck. He rocked him back and forth in his arms to try and comfort him, rubbing Kevin’s back until his crying eventually quieted down to a soft, occasional sniffle.

“That isn’t going to happen,” Connor assured him after a time, carding a hand through his hair in soothing motion. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

“When I’m with you,” Kevin choked out, sniffling as he lifted his head from Connor’s shoulder. “Like this. When we’re together like this and everything is perfect and I think about telling them... it seems so easy, you know?” He sniffled again and wiped at his eyes. “I feel like I can do anything as long as I’m with you. Like I can just march up to their door right now and tell them the truth and everything would be okay. Like it would just be so easy.” He let out a sad laugh. “But then when I’m with them, Connor. When I’m actually with them and they’re right in front of me and I even think about telling them... it feels like the most impossible thing in the world. Like I might actually die if I say the words out loud. That’s why I haven’t told them yet, Connor. It’s not because I don’t love you. I do. I’m just...”

“I know,” Connor whispered, his own eyes filling with tears. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m more than happy to be there with you when you tell them. I can be right by your side the whole, entire time.”

“I know that,” Kevin smiled sadly. “I just... I don’t know, yet. I think I need to think on it for a while. Is that okay?”

“Take your time.” Connor gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. “I’m not going anywhere.”
He thought for a moment about telling Kevin the rest of the story: about how he had gotten so angry at Chris that he chucked his iPad into the wall, shattering it to pieces. He thought about telling him about his homesickness for New York City and about how he may or may not have started a war with his potentially-senile neighbor. But, he didn't. He wasn't quite sure why he didn't, but something stopped him. Embarrassment, perhaps. Or maybe he just didn't want to bring Kevin down any farther than he already was.

He watched Kevin try to compose himself, wiping furiously at his eyes. “Maybe we can, um, play a quick game of Scrabble or something?” Kevin suggested, sniffing as he gestured to the board. “Before we head to bed. I mean, you already have it set up and everything. It might cheer me up a little.”

“I don’t see how getting your ass whooped is going to make you feel any better,” Connor smirked. “But, sure, I’m game.” He leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Kevin’s wet cheek. “But first: what the Hell happened to you at dinner? You look like you’ve been run over by truck.”

“Gee, thanks,” Kevin teased with a sad smile, mimicking Connor's earlier comment.

Connor rolled his eyes. “You know what I meant. Now, seriously, what happened?”

Kevin paused a moment. He could feel the words. They were right there, on the tip of his tongue. He wanted to tell Connor the truth. He really did. He wanted to tell him about how he fucked up with the photo on Facebook, about how he was confronted by Jack and ended up lying, about how everyone in his family now thinks he's helping Connor "find his way back to God"; that Connor McKinley, of all people, was interested in rejoining the Church.

It was ironic, considering that Connor would rather outrun a hoard of flesh-eating zombies than ever set foot in a Mormon Church again. How could he ever look Connor in the eyes and admit what he’d done? That he’d taken this many steps in the wrong direction? That, even after all of the reassurances and love and support from Connor, after all the progress he’d made, that he still couldn’t look his family in the eye and say those two little words: I’m gay. That he’d rather lie and make up wild stories than ever admit to his family who it was that he really loved.

He opened his mouth to say the words, to tell Connor the truth, but all that came out was, “This.” Kevin sighed and pulled out his phone. He tapped the LDS Singles icon and held it out to Connor to show him. “This happened to me.”

It wasn’t a lie—it just wasn’t the whole truth.

“What is ‘this’?” Connor asked, taking the phone from Kevin’s hand. “What am I looking at?”

“It’s an app for Mormons to find and date other Mormons.” Kevin explained, followed by a tired sigh. “My sister insisted on making me a profile. She thought it might help me find a wife or something. But don’t worry, it’s not for real or anything. I'm deleting it tonight.”

“That is so sweet that she was trying to help though,” Connor gushed, as he scrolled through the app. “But also highly disturbing. Good God, look at some of these women.” He kept on scrolling fast and furious through the app, until one woman’s photo made his eyes bug out. “I’m sorry, but does your sister honestly think you can’t do better than this?”

“No, she knows I could do better than that.” Kevin’s lips tugged up into a small smile at Connor's quip. “She just thinks I don’t try hard enough, that's all. She thought this might make it easier for me
to…I don’t know, put myself out there or something.” He was quiet for a moment as he watched Connor eagerly sift through the profiles on the app. “She just worries about me, you know. That’s the only reason I even let her do this.” He was quiet again as he watched Connor click on various profiles, seemingly fascinated. “Connor? Are you listening to me?”

Connor looked up at that, a shit-eating grin on his face as he held the phone up to Kevin’s face. “Tell me this isn’t the most horrific thing you’ve ever seen.”

Kevin was about to chastise him for being mean, until his eyes settled on the picture. “Oh, um, wow.” It was the profile of a twenty-four-year-old divorcee with crazy eyes and missing front teeth. If that wasn’t bad enough, she was also donning an oversized *I Heart Jesus* tee shirt. “Well, I’m, um… I’m just glad you’re not mad about this or anything.”

Connor glanced back down to the phone, looking confused. “Why would I be mad? You said so yourself this isn’t real. You were just doing it to make your sister happy.”

“I don’t know,” Kevin muttered. “Your boyfriend comes home and shows you the Mormon dating app he just signed up for because his family doesn’t know he’s gay and in a relationship with a man. I just thought you might be… miffed, or something.”

“Your sister loves you, Kevin,” Connor said, as though it should have been obvious. “She was just trying to help. I could never be mad at you for that. Besides, this app is amazing. Okay, look at this one.” He held the phone in front of Kevin’s face. “Twenty-one years old, divorced—why are they all divorced?— and she has a *mullet*, Kevin.” He shoved the phone further into his face. “A *mullet*.”

“Alright, that’s it,” Kevin sighed. “I’m deleting that stupid thing right now. Hand it over.”

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Connor moved to the side so he couldn’t take it away. “Not until I get to have my fun.”

“Your *fun*?” Kevin scoffed. He reached out again, to try and take the phone back, but the other man continued to hold it *just* out of reach “Come on, Connor, I’m being serious. Give that back to me. Give it—give it back.”

“Okay, let’s see what we have here,” Connor mused, as he scrolled through the app. His grin was made of pure evil, too—*evil*. “Ah, here we go. Kevin Price. Male. Twenty-eight years old. Divorced. In my spare time, I enjoy reading, watching movies, taking care of my daughter, *cooking,*” Connor snorted at the word and sent Kevin a *look*. “You have got to be kidding me. You know how to make a total of five things, Kevin. This is false advertising.”

“It is not.”

“It is so. What are the ladies going to say when they find out all you know how to make are chocolate chip pancakes and the blandest pasta I’ve ever eaten in my life?”

“My pasta is *delicious.*”

“Your pasta sucks. You boil it for way too long and you use *Ragu* sauce.”

“What’s wrong with *Ragu* sauce?”

“It’s literally one step above ketchup. Wait, no, not even a step. A *half* a step.”

“Connor—"
“It’s like this much of a step.” He squeezed two of his fingers together to demonstrate. “It’s basically ketchup. You put ketchup on pasta.”

“Come on, Connor,” Kevin groaned, trying to make another unsuccessful grab at the phone. “Give that back.”

But, he did no such thing. He just smiled and wiggled his butt around in his chair, probably to try and get in a comfortable position to thoroughly enjoy his fun.

“Oh goodie, there’s more,” Connor said, and cleared his throat before continuing on. “I choose to live by the testimony of the gospel. I attend Church regularly and make sure to instill the teachings of the gospel into my daughter. I am His servant, above all things, and am always looking for new ways to serve Heavenly Father.”

Connor lazily tilted his head towards Kevin, raising an eyebrow in that way he did sometimes, whenever he was about to take Kevin down a peg or two. His eyes were sparkling with a kind of youthful playfulness, one that was making it nearly impossible for Kevin to keep a straight face. He was annoyed at Connor’s game, but at the same time, he could feel his resistance cracking a little bit every time Connor looked at him like that.

“Nice profile,” Connor said, evenly. “For an uptight, goody-two-shoes Mormon without a single scathing incident to his name.”

Kevin wrinkled his nose. “Thanks?”

“But it looks like you’ve conveniently forgotten to mention a few things here.”

“Oh, yeah?” Kevin knew exactly where Connor was going with this. It made his lips curl up into the smallest smile. He could feel his muscles relaxing now, in a kind of silent resignation, and found himself succumbing willingly to Connor’s little game. He always did, eventually. He leaned in and rested a cheek against Connor’s shoulder and slid an arm around the front of his waist. He didn’t even try to grab the phone away this time. “Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Connor hummed. “Things like botching up our entire mission, disobeying orders, lying, drinking copious amounts of coffee, drinking alcohol, watching R-Rated movies, using the Lord’s name in vain, cursing…and the worst offense of them all: engaging in acts of sin with a member of the same sex.” He bopped Kevin on the nose, making it crinkle. “Tsk-tsk. You are a bad Mormon, aren’t you?”

“I really like that last one a lot,” Kevin murmured into Connor’s shoulder. “It’s my favorite.”

“Oh, moving on,” Connor dismissed, nudging Kevin’s face out of the way. “Seeking a like-minded woman of God for meaningful conversation, companionship, and fun dates. Looking to get re-married to the right person and I just can’t wait to bring more children into this world. Do you have what it takes to be the next Mrs. Price? Message me to find out.”

Connor could barely muster out the last few words, having completely lost himself to a fit of giggles at Kevin’s expense. Letting out an obnoxious snort, he keeled over in his chair, clutching at his stomach for support. He laughed and laughed and laughed, until his cheeks turned an unnatural shade of pink.

“Oh my God, this is gold,” Connor cried out, as he struggled to control his laughter. “Remind me to thank your sister the next time I see her, please.”

“Alright, I’m officially humiliated,” Kevin sighed. “Can I please have my phone back now?” He
motioned for Connor to hand it over. “You’ve had your fun. Fun’s over now.”

“Oh, no,” Connor said through subsiding giggles. “There is plenty more fun to be had, I assure you.”

“Look, all I want to do is delete that stupid thing off my phone, play a relaxing game of Scrabble, and go to bed early, okay?” Kevin pleaded. “Then I can just pretend as though this entire day never even happened.”

“Not until I get a look at these messages.” Connor leaned back into his chair, gleefully kicking his legs up onto the snow-covered ottoman. “This is gonna be good.”

“Messages?” Kevin peered curiously over his shoulder. “I got messages?”

“Three.” Connor pointed to the little heart indicator at the top of the screen. “And who knows? One of them might even have what it takes to be the next Mrs. Price.”

Kevin rolled his eyes, and slid an arm around Connor’s waist, pulling him close. “You’re the only one I want and you know it.”

He pressed a soft kiss to the inside of Connor’s ear, making him squirm and blush at the same time.

“You sure about that?” Connor pointed to the message on the screen. “Because Becky from Provo thinks you’re a cutie.” He gave Kevin’s cheek a little pinch to illustrate his point. “She has blue eyes, blonde hair, and a labradoodle named Isaiah. She enjoys slaughtering her friends at Candy Crush, studying the gospel of the Lord our Savior Jesus Christ—amen—and drinking hot tea on rainy afternoons.” Connor glanced up at Kevin, looking far too amused for his own good. “I don’t know, Kevin—sounds like a potential Mrs. Price to me.”

Kevin could feel his eyes instantly soften, his lips curling upward at the stupid joke. Connor always seemed to know how to make him smile, even in times like these when smiling felt impossible, when it felt as though the world was literally crumbling down around him. Then again, Kevin had always found it difficult to keep his walls up around Connor McKinley because Connor McKinley was so good at tearing them down. He had an innate ability to soothe Kevin’s fears, to calm his nerves, to make him laugh even when there was nothing to laugh about. Connor had a gift for looking on the brighter side of things, and was able to make light of situations that Kevin would have otherwise agonized over. His gentle teasing, the bemused twinkle in his eyes, were enough to let the light shine through, even when Kevin’s whole world felt dark.

Kevin had always admired that about Connor. He especially admired the way he looked in moments like these; rosy cheeks, smirk playing at his lips, glint in his eyes. His eyes were a bright, piercing shade of blue, a stark contrast to the night sky, to the darkness that surrounded them on all sides. It seemed as though the longer Kevin gazed into those eyes, the more time they spent together, the more Kevin could feel his walls beginning to crumble. And, as much as he tried to resist, he needed to let them crumble. He had to let them crumble if he and Connor were going to have any chance at making it. And Kevin did want them to make it. He wanted to spend the rest of his life gazing into those beautiful blue eyes, holding hands, holding him, and laughing even when there was nothing to laugh about. He wanted Connor, all of Connor, despite the inevitable hardship that lay ahead and all the hardship that lay behind.

He leaned in after a moment, gently brushed his lips against Connor’s, and whispered, “You’re the only one I want.”

He had said the same words just moments before, but they came out sounding different this time; final, determined, and with an air of absolute certainty.
He pressed their lips together, circled his arms around his waist, relishing in the taste and the *feeling*, intoxicating and infinite. The chilly winter air nipped at his cheeks and his ungloved hands felt as though they were slowly growing numb, but he didn’t really care. In hindsight, he knew they probably should have taken this inside where it was warmer, but Kevin’s mind wasn’t exactly in the most practical of places at the moment.

Instead of taking it inside, he collapsed down to the snowy floor of his porch, pulling Connor down on top of him, kissing him with a rare amount of desperation and urgency. Connor didn’t seem to mind, as he let out a moan in acceptance of the gesture and slid a hand underneath Kevin’s sweater. He ran his fingers over the skin of Kevin's back, making him whine and buck his hips against Connor’s leg.

It was silent, save for the tearing of buttons and unzipping of jeans. He couldn’t feel anything other than Connor’s hands tangling in his hair, pulling on it with insistence, and on his skin—hands that felt unusually warm for having been outside in the cold for so long. Kevin couldn’t feel anything other than being drunk on Connor, on love, on the *feeling*. It all melded together as one, making it all too easy for Kevin to lose himself in the moment, to fall right back into the place where he felt safe and loved and cared for.

He longed to exist here, and only here, in the place where nothing could hurt him and he knew no one could never find him. This place was a well-kept secret, its door locked to everyone, save for himself and Connor. It belonged exclusively to them. It was his, it was *theirs*, and even though he knew damn well that the fog would eventually lift, exposing him to harsh reality once again, that he would wake up to find himself stuck in between the stars, drifting between the two warring sides with an impossible decision to make, it just didn’t seem to matter. Not now, not in this moment. He would deal with all of that later, another time. He’d deal with it tomorrow or the next week or the next month or the next year. Because right now, all he wanted was Connor. He wanted to get lost in Connor, in the feeling, to roll around in snow with the love of his life—kissing and giggling; making each other laugh, making each other come.

There would be plenty of time for tears later on and, right now, Kevin Price just wanted one more night of laughter.

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