

All I Want For Kwanzaa - Part 1

For TJ

By TheSpiralledEye

Alex hates the holidays but makes the mistake of complaining to his cab driver about it. Now he's trapped in an alternate reality where he is a black woman who must learn the true meaning of Kwanzaa in order to get back home and maybe find love on the way.

After so many years spent in a dingy apartment in the middle of New York Alex had forgotten just how intense Christmas in white suburbia was. As the taxi drove down the familiar streets of his childhood, every house was lit up and covered in tacky plastic; lights, fake Santas and reindeer, the works. He grimaced; his parents were big on Christmas, wore the stupid sweaters and everything. It was great when he was a kid but being forced into those itchy pullovers every year and forced to sing carols around the piano like that was something normal people ever did was beyond tiring. He managed to skip out the last three years, using work as an excuse but this time his mother was having none of it. He had tried every excuse but she was persistent. He had hoped that when all the flights were delayed and he rang to say he wouldn't be arriving until the day after Christmas, she might say not to bother. But no, instead she happily decided to 'delay' Christmas, just for him, so they could all celebrate together. What was he supposed to say to that? He may have hated the holiday but he did love his mother and if she was so inclined to put the whole affair on hold just so he could be there...he'd grit his teeth and bare it for a day. He sank into the leather seat with a sigh, already imagining the garish display of tinsel and fairy lights waiting for him.

"Long flight?" The taxi driver asked.

"No just...I'm not a Christmas person." Alex grumbled, "All the fuss, the crowded family dinners, the presents from people who have no idea what you actually like, ugh."

"Come now, holidays are about more than that!" The driver insisted, "Me, I'm Jewish, so I don't go in for all the pine trees but we celebrate around the same time. The presents are nice, but it's presence that's important, get it?"

The man beamed as if he'd just said something deeply wise and Alex gave him a half smile.

"You sound like all those cheesy Christmas films they play this time of year." Alex rolled his eyes, "The true meaning of Christmas. They can spout that crap all they want, everybody knows it stopped being about that a long time ago. Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwa-whatever it is that black people do, it's all different names for the same schtick."

The driver just frowned, oh what, were we not supposed to say 'black people' now? Alex couldn't keep up with what was PC anymore.

"I think you could use one of those films, sir." The driver said with a bit too much bite, "Learn a lesson or two."

"Tch, just drive."

Alex chuckled to himself; the guy was probably just irritated he didn't get to play fairy godfather and reinvigorate his spirit of Christmas or whatever. Alex would normally feel sorry for him and feel more inclined to play along but he was irritated as it was, he swore he could already taste his mothers dry turkey. They were only two blocks away now and as he leaned against the cold car window he closed his eyes and sighed, imagining a world in which he could ride out this stupid holiday back in New York with a TV dinner and some Friends reruns. The car came to a sudden stop and he almost fell forward, held up only by his seat belt digging into his chest and making him wince. The jolt didn't feel that hard but the pain in his chest was sharp and he quickly sat up straight to find they had arrived. That was fast, had he managed to nod off for a minute?

"Sorry 'bout that miss! The ice, you know how it is around this time."

"Miss? Is that your idea of an insult?" Alex mumbled, freezing in place when he noticed his voice sounded...odd.

The driver turned around and gave him a funny look; for a second Alex swore he saw a mischievous twinkle in his eye only to disappear moments later.

"Sorry, miss? Not sure what you mean." He replied, "Why don't you hop out and I'll get your bags."

Alex just blinked; there was a strange glowing haze in the air, maybe he was more jetlagged than he realised? But the time difference wasn't that big. Confused, he stepped out onto the snow covered footpath and felt his jaw drop. The street...it was the right one but everything felt off. All the houses were decked up to the nines, not with cheap Santas and plastic candy canes but full on light displays; one of the neighbours even had one of those animatronic deer that turned its head when it sensed motion. The whole street was pristine, no garbage in sight and paired with the thousands of lights it was almost blinding; it was like something out of a Hallmark film. Well, all except one house.

His parents house had none of the Christmas cheer but instead was decorated with...flags? Red, black and green plastic streamers were strewn across the windows with matching lanterns. Letters cut from cardboard were stuck to the front window, spelling out the words 'Happy Kwanzaa!!'.

Alex wanted to shrivel up and die. His mother was one for chasing fads; every time they talked she had a new diet, a new brand, a new health tip that was all the rage only to disparage it three months later. Alex may not have been always up to date on what was considered appropriate when it came to African Americans anymore but he was pretty sure appropriating their holiday was a big no-no. His cheeks burned with humiliation, this paired with his stupid comment in the taxi was sure to make this man thinking he was a raging racist, God what a nightmare. The driver put his bag down next to him on the sidewalk and to his surprise, gave him a smile and tipped his hat.

"You have a good holiday now, miss, remember what's important." He smiled, "And careful in those heels, the icy is slippery enough on its own!"

Alex felt like he had whiplash, he was still coming to terms with the insanity of the decorations; he barely had the mental capacity to comprehend what had just been said. Before he could question it the driver was back in his cab, pulling out into the street and leaving a very confused Alex behind.

"Heels?"

Feeling dumbfounded he looked to his feet and...he was wearing heels! No, those...those could not be his feet. In shock he wiggled his toes, gaping when the ones he was looking at moved as well; they were attached to his legs, he could feel them but...they were the wrong shape and size not to mention the *completely wrong colour*. Instead of the almost sickly pale hue that came from working inside all day they were now a rich, dark brown. Alex did not

consider himself a vain person but even he knew what his own damn feet looked like fairly intimately and they certainly were not delicately pedicured, dainty things. What...he must have fallen asleep in the taxi and now he was dreaming, that was the only explanation.

“Alex! What are you doing standing out in the cold you foolish girl, come inside!” He blinked, looking up to see a figure standing in his parents doorway.

A slightly plump looking black woman wearing a necklace of bright blue stones was waving at him warmly. She was on the older side, but almost in a Hollywood way where the only real signs of her age were the grey tips to her hair and slight crinkle around her eyes.

“Your father’s latest obsession is cocktail mixing, come on, he’s making stingers!”

The confusion just kept mounting; in shock Alex bent over and picked up his bag, half dragging it up the snow covered stairs to greet the woman. She wrapped her arms tightly around Alex’s neck and once again she winced, feeling his chest compressed; still sort from that jolt most likely.

“So glad you could join us this year Alexandra.” The woman beamed, “Now, come grab a cocktail, your father, bless his soul, found a new blog all about the wonders of mixology. He’s been dying for you and Sam to try his latest creations.”

A wave of relief passed over him, even as his uncertainty mounted. Samantha, in typical big sister tradition, always knew what to do. She would know what the heck was going on. Walking through the threshold and into the house was like stepping into a waking dream. This was his parents house alright but everything was subtly off, the bones were the same but the trappings all wrong. The photos on the walls were as he remembered them, same poses, same events, but the people were all wrong. Where his sixth grade soccer team photo once sat, there was now a girl with tight cornrows beaming while holding a netball. He peered at her curiously and the woman, his mother supposedly, put a hand on his shoulder.

“Time flies, it seems like just yesterday I had to lift you to light the candles each morning.”

“Candles?”

“The Kwanzaa candles silly, are you feeling alright dear?”

Alex did not have the chance to reply before an unfamiliar man's voice cut him off.

"If she'd brought some flu into the house I'm gonna be pissed!" A dark skinned man with a blindingly white smile appeared in the hall, "I don't want to spend Kwanza sniffing. Do you have any idea how often I get sick now that Amelia is in kindergarten?"

"Sam! Your sister just got here, be nice."

This...this was too much. Sister? Alexandra? And who the hell was this person because it certainly was not his sister Samantha! His breath began to come in sharp bursts, he felt lightheaded and the older woman peered at him with a furrowed brow.

"Are you alright sweetheart?"

He looked down to avoid her gaze; which turned out to be a massive mistake because just like before he was met with something wrong. Breasts; with a generous amount of cleavage showing in his low cut sweater. He had been so focused on his shoes before he'd not even noticed them and now that soreness made sense. It was about the only thing though.

"I need the bathroom." Alex croaked with a hand over his mouth, pushing past this new Sam to run for the toilet; at least that was still in the same place.

A young voice echoed up the hall as he fled.

"Is Auntie Alex pregnant like mommy?"

"No sweetheart, she's probably just car sick." Though Sam did not sound too sure.

The door slammed closed and Alex sent a silent prayer of thanks to whoever decided to give these old houses thick walls. Full of panic he ripped off the jumper to reveal a long sleeve, low cut red shirt and jeans; it was similar to what he had been wearing but now fitted to a curvaceous new body. He lifted up the hem to reveal yet more smooth, dark skin.

"This can't be happening." He breathed rushing to the mirror.

His hands gripped the sink and he stared into the mirror. It was like whiplash, staring at your own reflection and not recognising it. The woman who stared back at him was beautiful; that could not be disputed, but similar to his new 'mother' she almost looked too pretty, like she'd had a full team of make up artists at her disposal to create perfectly done mascara and lip liner. Experimentally he swiped a finger across his now full lips, no smudging whatsoever, apparently this is just what his new face *a/ways* looked like. That he could look past in the moment but his hair...that was something else.

Tight, dark curls styled into an afro but parted slightly to one side. It was light and bouncy, perfectly framing his round, heart shaped face and dark eyes. With fascination he raised his hands to it, experimentally patting it down in places only to watch it spring back up; and it was *so soft*.

"This is unreal."

A knock at the door.

"Auntie Alex, I need to pee."

"J-just a minute!"

That voice, there was only one child in their family; his sister's son Arthur but that voice was certainly not his. Given what he had seen though, he had a fairly good idea of what to expect when he opened the door. A little girl, with adorably big brown eyes, was looking up at him with a cheeky grin.

"Thank you!" She zoomed past and Alex had no choice but to step back into the hallway.

Idly Alex wondered if she was still going to like the toy car he bought her male counterpart.

"Is everything alright, sugar?" The older woman came to his side.

"Fine...mom." He swallowed, "Like Sam said, car sick."

He had a theory, crazy as it was but if he had become Alexandra and Samantha Sam then this woman...could she be his father under the same effect? She had already mentioned his

'father's mixology blog which was something his mother was far more likely to be interested in. So perhaps...

"So mom, how's the stamp collection going?"

His father was the only man in the world who still collected stamps; it was a hobby nobody in their family liked hearing about, not even their mother but this woman's eyes lit up as bright as the Christmas lights outside.

"Oh it's going wonderfully, you know I found some rare Canadian ones at the antique shop the other day with the geese flying in reverse. I tried to tell your father but did he care, no sir."

Sam groaned in the next room.

"Alex, why would you start her on that? We'll be hearing about it all night!"

"Because Alex is a good girl who cares about her mother's hobbies, unlike some people." His 'mother' grinned, there was no real bite to her words.

That confirmed it; somehow everybody had swapped genders, not to mention race. Though, it didn't explain how strangely pretty everybody was, or that glowing haze in the air that would not go away no matter how much he rubbed his eyes.

"Alex, come on in here and try this!"

"I swear he's trying to get us all plastered right before dinner." His mother sighed.

The living room was decorated just like the rest of the house, with flags and streamers but also candles. Sam was just laying down a mat and placing what looked like a menorah down on it with a handsome man who looked no older than fifty shadowing her every move, filled glasses in hand.

"Dad, I tried like, three already." Sam complained, "Let me finish setting up the Kinara so Amelia can light the first candle then I will try it."

"I bought new brandy and everything, did you know the best brandy comes from-"

“Cognac, I know darling.” His mother interrupted, “Quit pestering him, I am sure Alex will try your stinger.”

The glass was thrust into his hand and frankly, after the absolute insanity that was the last few minutes, Alex could use the drink and gratefully gulped it down only for his new father to cry out in disappointment.

“This is a sipping drink, girl! Bah, I have to make you another now. You need to savour it.” He tried to sound annoyed but he was already running over to a table littered with bottles and glasses, clearly eager to have a reason to make another.

His mother on the other hand scowled.

“Alex, it’s not ladylike to guzzle it down like that.”

“Sorry, also what’s a kinara?”

This time everybody stopped and gave him a disapproving look; he could practically hear the record scratch.

“I know you don’t like all this traditional stuff but there is no need for rudeness.” His mother said with pursed lips.

Sam came to his rescue, throwing a brotherly arm around his shoulder.

“New York humour mom, that’s all.” His grin was just a little too wide, “It’s been so long Alex has forgotten how us simple suburbanites talk. Isn’t that right?”

That white smile suddenly reminded Alex of a shark; he swallowed and nodded.

“Yeah, sorry mom.”

Sam hit him on the back.

“Come on, let’s get your stuff settled upstairs, huh? Your bag is still in the hallway.”

He nodded, wanting any excuse to escape the awkward situation. He tried to pull the suitcase up the stairs as he had many times before when travelling but eventually had to hand it over to Sam. His new body was so small compared to his old one, after only getting three steps up the stairs he was defeated. Sam just rolled his eyes, dragging it up to his old childhood room. It was strange; the room had a cold emptiness that was almost creepy. The bed was so starched and perfectly made that it was clear nobody had slept in it for years. All the shelves were bare and the desk shut tight. Yet there was not a speck of dust to be found. A sudden rush of warmth filled his chest; his mother still cleaned this room every week, he was sure. The air was not stale as it would be if she had only cleaned it for this one visit and for the first time, Alex felt guilty for having stayed away so long. Beneath the bed, he could spot several aged cardboard boxes, likely containing the small things he left behind when he moved out almost a decade ago. He cast his eyes over the pale blue walls, smirking at the small stains left from the blutack he'd used to stick posters to the walls as a teenager. In his world, they had been of rock bands. Did Alex do the same? There was even a tiny dent in the wall where he rammmed into it with his roller skates. He knelt down, brushing his fingers over the crack, oddly comforted by its presence. Perhaps he was in a different reality now but the bones of his life, so it seemed, were the same.

“You really shouldn't make jokes like that.” Sam said seriously, knocking him from his reverie. “I know you hate the holidays but Kwanzaa is important to mom and dad, especially mom. You not showing up these last few years really hurt her.”

Of all the things to follow him into this weird reality, it had to be this?

“Look, I get it. I've just been busy.” Alex stood, “There are...serious things going on, things that are way more important than getting into the Christmas spirit.”

“It's Kwanza, I get that people probably don't celebrate it in your circles in New York but come on, have a little pride in your heritage.”

He'd only had this heritage for half an hour! Not that he could tell Sam that; for whatever reason it seemed he was the only one who remembered being different. He forced a tight smile, if only to make his new brother go away.

“I will try.”

There was pause and Sam bit his cheek before asking, somewhat awkwardly.

“Are you pregnant, is that what this very important thing is?”

“No!”

God, the fact that he could even ask that made Alex feel queasy.

“Okay, okay.” Sam held up his hands in defeat, “But if you ever *are* you can always talk to me, I helped Rachel through her pregnancy pretty well and she always says Amelia is worth it. Sucks she can't be here, she was supposed to be on the evening flight but it got cancelled because of the storm.”

That answered the silent question as to how his brother turned sister had a child; apparently this change extended to his brother in law, Ron as well. Poor guy.

“Anyway, come downstairs and sing with us, okay? It'll mean the world to them.”

A cold sweat appeared on the back of his neck.

“What are we singing?”

“Kujichagulia is always up first.” Sam shrugged, “I know you hate singing but just one?”

“Yeah of course.” His smile turned tighter, “Just give me a minute.”

Sam gave his shoulder a squeeze and headed for the door, only stopping to call over his shoulder.

“There is no harm in getting into the spirit of the holidays, maybe you'll finally figure out what's so important, New York girl.”

The door closed, leaving him in the dark gloom of the unlit room.

Who the hell talks like that? Alex half expected a curtain to go up to reveal some invisible audience Sam had been addressing. As much as he wanted to ignore it in favour of sorting this

all out, Alex didn't want his new reversed parents to be cross with him, holidays were awkward enough as it is. He pulled out his phone and googled the song, hastily trying to memorise the lyrics. Through the floor Alex heard an unfamiliar song start to play, clashing with the carollers outside; which in itself was weird because not once in his life had there been carollers on this street. He looked out the window to see the little huddle of people all standing on the street corner, seemingly just singing for whomever felt like listening.

Alex narrowed his eyes, one of them looked oddly familiar...the man turned his head and Alex gasped, it was the cab driver! The man looked right up at him and winked before turning back to face the same direction as everybody else. Alex rubbed his eyes, shocked to find when he looked back the space where the man had stood was empty, or even a pair of shoe prints visible in the snow. This was getting really weird now, and considering everything else that had happened, that was saying something.

Finally over the initial shock and alone with time to breath Alex began slowly putting all the strange pieces of this ill fitting puzzle together. The genderbending, the strange new holiday, his reversed family, eerily perfect looking neighbourhood and people, the strange bloom effect that had still not gone away; it was almost as if his life had turned into one of those cheesy Hallmark films. His eyes snapped open; a man, humbugging the holidays, ignores the advice of a kindly old nobody only to be thrust into a situation with no choice but to learn and adapt in order to survive; this was a hallmark movie! A fucking Kwanza Hallmark film, did they even make those? Crazy as it all sounded, even just to himself, that was what made the most sense. So...how did he escape back to his real life? Outside the carollers were still singing but the man was nowhere to be seen; something told Alex he would not be showing up again until the 'climax'.

That was it! If he played his part and got to the end of the film, surely that man, if he truly was a man, would reappear and he could gush about how he has totally learned the error of his ways. Then he would be zapped back to his real life and he could get on with it. All those cheesy films were so one dimensional and cliché, how hard could following one really be? He already had his crusty beginning, now all he had to do was figure out how to celebrate Kwanzaa, have a few shots of him looking wistfully happy and then at the end of the night the man would appear for the finale. Feeling confident for the first time since stepping out the taxi Alex smiled, walking down stairs after giving the lyrics of the song one last look over. He was going to play his part so perfectly there was no way the man could refuse to turn him back.

Walking back into the living room little Amelia was watching with wide eyes as his father lit a black candle in the middle of what he'd guessed was a menorah though reaction told him it was likely the kinara. His mother beamed and Amelia clapped as the fire took hold and Sam hit play on his ipod, starting up the song and fixing Alex with a hard look. Alex just smiled and began singing along; his mother was positively beaming. Even if this was not his 'real' family, he had to admit it did feel nice having somebody feel proud of him. New York bosses were not the type to

hand out affirmations. It was hard to keep a straight face through the song; Alex could practically see the cinematography in his head, the montage of him singing along, getting into the mood without noticing. Just as they were finishing there was a ring at the doorbell. His father, who was already six drinks deep before dinner grinned boyishly.

“Ah, that’ll be David!”

Alex almost did a double take.

“Wait, David James? As in Davy?”

“Yes!” His mother smiled, “He flew in yesterday to surprise his folks and wouldn’t you know it, they decided to have a beach Christmas in Hawaii! So I invited him to come spend time with us!”

He and Davy had been thick as thieves growing up; they went to playgroup together, then elementary school. When it was announced his parents were sending him to the boarding high school across the district Alex had even feverishly tried to get a scholarship to keep them together. When he’d failed Davy had promised to stay in touch but by the time they were fifteen they were worlds apart and barely hung out at all even when Davy was back in town. Alex hadn't seen the guy since they were eighteen almost a decade ago.

A sense of genuine excitement flooded him; seeing his old friend again might actually make this holiday movie hell bearable. He could hear his father greeting somebody in the front hall, their voices were muffled by the howling wind outside but Alex found himself strangely struck by the deepness of the baritone voice echoing into the room. A whirl of snow, let in with the gust swirled into the living room bringing with it a handsome man with a chiselled jaw and warm auburn hair.

Well...little Davy sure had grown up. Alex’s palms began to sweat and beneath his new breasts his heart was beating fast. What was this nervousness? Seeing an old friend again shouldn’t have his pulse racing like this. He watched as Davy’s eyes found him and they widened ever so slightly, his mouth parting in shock before he quickly snapped it shut. Pink dusted his cheeks and he reached out, offering Alex his hands.

“It’s so good to see you again, Alex. Or do you prefer Alexandra now?”

“Alex is fine.” His voice was strained and he was so anxious he almost forgot to take Davy’s hand. It was rough, but strong and he swore he could feel a tiny spark pass between them.

He gave a flustered giggle, taking back his hand after far too long. It was so good to see him again! He was about to offer him a seat when the mood was ruined by a horrible realisation. This universe operated on cheesy holiday film logic; that being the case he had seen this very scene play out in a dozen different romantic comedies. Davy was...his *love interest*. *But...but that could not be!*

He was not gay, he'd never had any feelings for Davy so why did he all of a sudden feel so compelled to go and sit next to him on the couch so their knees could bump together. His father was trying to coax one of his cocktails into him and Davy gave a charming smile as he accepted the glass; Alex had never seen such a handsome man, he almost seemed to glow.

“Alexandra? Are you listening to me?”

“What?”

His mother shook her head with a wry smile.

“Come on dear, come help me in the kitchen. Dinner is almost ready.”

Walking away from this situation was probably for the best, but he couldn't help glancing behind him, noting Davy watching him go. Never in his life had he felt such a strange and sudden connection, is this what the stories meant by love at first sight? Or at the very least attraction at first sight, did it even count if you knew each other years ago? All these emotions swirled inside him as his mother led him into the kitchen.

Once again he was smacked in the face with the differences to the norm. Instead of roast turkey and biscuits there was chickpeas and sweet potatoes; the whole room smelt of spices he could not identify and there was not a plum pudding to be found. His mother emptied a rice cooker full of pungent smelling grains into a bowl and handed it to him.

“Bell peppers are in the fridge and the spices are on the rack, stir this up for the jollof would you?”

He nodded; he had no idea what jollof was but thought it better not to ask. A few discreet glances at his phone told him what to look for in his mothers very much expanded spice rack and he did his best to guess the measurements.

“You know,” His mother broke the silence, “I always did like David. You two were quite the pair.”

Alex felt his cheeks begin to heat.

“We were good friends.” It was true.

“I know you hate my nagging,” His mother continued, “But you’re almost thirty dear, it's time to start thinking about family.”

“I am focusing on my career-”

“That will be gone in forty years sweetheart, family won't, God forbid.”

A warm hand gripped his arm.

“I’m just saying, David is a good man and judging by the way you both looked at each other, old feelings die hard.”

“Mom!” He gaped, “I never-that’s not what this is.”

His mother just smiled in that irritating way that only a mother could, all knowing and confident in her read of the situation. The idea that in this weird, mixed up universe Alexandra and Davy had had feelings for each other, maybe even dated was beyond weird. He made a mental note to try and find some proof of the nature of their old relationship as soon as dinner was over. Alex felt his ears turning pink as the plans formed; if this was part of the story, what was he going to do? He had to play along to escape this nightmare but these strange strings inside him felt far more real than they should. And hellish film world aside, Davy was his old friend he didn't want to toy with his affections; who was to say that when he swapped back to reality his actions wouldn't remain basically the same. What if his world's Davy was gay and then he had to untangle that whole mess? There were just too many questions for him to make an informed plan.

“Dinner’s ready!”

He almost dropped the jollof rice as his mothers voice yelled out. He readied himself with setting the table, laying out a number of dishes he hoped somebody else would explain to David for his own secret benefit. Even though he was bent over the table, reaching to adjust a centrepiece candle with his back to the living room door, Alex felt him when he entered. It was almost like a subtle heat at his back, like he could feel Davy’s eyes on him.

All of a sudden he was very much aware of his new curves; how tightly his pants fit around his hips and ass and he stood up straight, feeling suddenly self conscious.

“Are there assigned seats?” Davy asked with a smile.

“Um...” He had no idea.

“Not at all!” Sam said with a mischievous smile, “Why don't you sit next to Alex, that way mom and dad can sit either end and I can sit next to my favourite girl!”

“Aw, but I wanted to sit with Auntie Alex.” Amelia pouted.

“Maybe next time.” He soothed, trying hard not to blush as he took his seat.

This was stupid, they had not even spoken yet for goodness sake! As the rest bowed their heads to give thanks Alex closed his eyes and breathed. He could do this; this weird movie universe was all about him learning to embrace the spirit of Kwanzaa, not fall in love, right? So maybe Davy was here to play the old friend who helped reconnect him to his past and help reignite his holiday spirit or some shit like that. Yes, that had to be it, if it wasn't he would *make* it so.

His new mother said grace and they all tucked in and Alex found himself surprised by just how delicious all this strange, ethnic food was.

“This is brilliant Mrs. Dellums.” Davy praised. “If this is just a small meal I can't wait to see what you consider a feast on New Years Eve.”

A feast, Alex made another mental note. He certainly had a lot of research to do about how to celebrate Kwanzaa.

“Oh please, David, call me Cheryl.” His new mom smiled, “You're not ten years old anymore.”

“Old habits die hard Mrs. Del-uh, Cheryl.”

“Indeed.” She beamed, eyes sliding over to Alex, clearly remembering their conversation in the kitchen.

Alex felt his ears turn pink.

“Are you okay?” Davy asked with a furrowed brow, “You look a little flushed.”

“S’just warm in here.” Alex mumbled, stuffing his face with more rice in a way that he hoped was unappealing, judging by the face his father pulled, he was succeeding.

Davy didn't seem perturbed at all though, happily chatting away for most of the meal with Amelia. Who, like all small children, was pleased to have somebody who would listen to her talk about anything and everything without pause. Sam kept trying to shush her and bring Alex into the conversation but he just smiled sweetly, playing the nice aunt, and encouraged her to talk all the more. The less he talked with Davy the more time he had to get his thundering heart under control. Damn this stupid magic! That had to be what was causing the flutter in his chest every time David's eyes met his, right?

Alex was glad when the food was finished and his father insisted on taking Davy into the lounge to make him a cocktail. For once, Alex silently praised God for his father's busybody attitude, Davy had no choice but to obey, shooting him a slightly guilty look as he was dragged out of the dining room.

“I'll clear the table!” Alex volunteered, gathering up some plates and heading in the opposite direction to his old friend.

“Oh no, dear.” His mother stepped in front, “I'll do that. You go have a drink with your friend.”

She had that look on her face, the one all mother's master early on and that their children knew meant they would not take no for an answer. Alex just nodded, swallowing hard and joining the others in the living room.

“Can we open presents now?” Amelia begged.

A bolt of panic washed over Alex at the suggestion; was his luggage changed? Something told him that the gifts he had bought all his family members would no longer suit their new lives, and he had nothing for Davy. Luckily, Sam came to the rescue.

“Sorry sweetie, presents on January first, remember?”

Amelia pouted.

“All my friends at school get their presents on Christmas! That was yesterday, how come I have to wait?”

A flash of brilliance; Alex cleared his throat.

“Because Amelia, Kwanzaa isn't about presents, it's about presence. Understand?” He said, feeling very proud of the cheesiness of the line, perfect for a hallmark film.

“No.” Replied the child, screwing up her nose. “You just said the same thing twice.”

Maybe that line had been a bit too much for a six year old.

“What I mean is, it's not about the things you get, the physical presents. It's about who is present.” He explained, “It's about celebrating with family.”

His father beamed at him with proud eyes; he was nailing this 'character arc'.

“Well said my girl!” He beamed, throwing an arm around his shoulder and thrusting another glass of rum filled cocktail into his fingers. “Very well said.”

A strange emotion swirled in Alex's stomach, a mixture of guilt, affection and a number of others all mixing to form nothing but confusion. He sat down on the couch, gripping the glass tight and taking a sip; his new father really was quite the mixologist.

“It's great to see you again.” Davy came and sat next to him, their knees touched but the man didn't seem to notice. Alex wasn't sure how, it felt as though a white hot poker was resting there.

“You too, Davey or do you prefer David now?” And he meant it, no matter how insane today was it did feel good to see him again.

“David usually,” The man blushed, “But...you can call me Davy. It feels nostalgic.”

“Everything about this place is, to me.” Alex added, “Sort of. It's uh, a little different.”

“I know what you mean.”

'No you really don't.' Alex thought wryly.

“Your mom has invited me to join you all each night, it’s so nice of her. My parents’ place is so big and empty when there is just me.”

“That place is practically a mansion,” Alex sighed, “Remember playing hide and seek in there? It would take one of us an hour to search all the rooms.”

“Half the time you fell asleep.”

“Well you took forever to find me!”

The two of them burst into laughter. A girlish giggle escaped Alex’s lips and he felt himself turning red from both embarrassment and alcohol; the laugh was cute, beautiful even, it felt strange knowing it came from *him*. Perhaps it was the alcohol, Davy or the fact that he’d just eaten a home cooked meal for the first time in years but Alex began to relax. The last few hours he had been so on edge he didn’t realise how much tension he’d been carrying in his shoulders till he finally leaned back into the couch and let them fall.

“Family overwhelming you?” Davy asked quietly, leaning back with her.

Alex swirled his glass, eyes on the dark hand that held it, still shocked to know it was his own.

“Something like that.”

Their legs were pressed together now and the world seemed to take on a shimmer, like somebody turned the bloom dial all the way up to eleven. The strange reality of the situation set in and Alex’s relaxation was suddenly shattered. He jumped up from the couch as if he’d been electrocuted.

“I uh, I am so sorry everybody but that flight really took it out of me.” He muttered, “Lovely to see you again Davy but I really need to go to bed.”

He looked sad but nodded in understanding, his mother on the other hand, who had just joined them glared daggers.

“You can stay for five more minutes surely, dear.” She insisted, “At least finish your drink.”

Alex gave an awkward smile and downed the rest of the cocktail, letting the rum burn his tongue on the way down.

“I really am sorry mom.” He insisted, giving her a quick hug, “But I am just too tired.”

He didn't stay to argue; he could hear them all muttering and apologising on his behalf before he'd even made it up the stairs. He wasn't even lying really, all this had made him exhausted and as he flopped down onto his childhood bed he could barely bring himself to open his phone to start researching. That and the fact that he could not stop thinking about how nice Davy's leg had felt against his own. Each time he tried to read an article on the tenets of Kwanzaa he found himself rereading the same sentence over and over without realising as his mind drifted back to those sparkling eyes. He half hoped his mother would appear and drag him back down stairs to that couch where he had felt most at home and despite his exhaustion, his eyes did not close until he heard the telltale sound of the front door closing as Davy left for the night.