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The Next Together

Written by

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In memory of Aisha Ahmad
1991–2011

You deserved so much more than life gave you.

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PROLOGUE

The last time they were together, it was late evening and they were being followed.

"It's happening again," Katherine said, and immediately regretted it. Matthew didn't reply, only squeezed her hand a little tighter. She knew what it meant. They were going to die.

They ran. Katherine tried to be quiet, but her breathing was dangerously loud in the silence. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Matthew pressed a palm against the small of her back, urging her on.

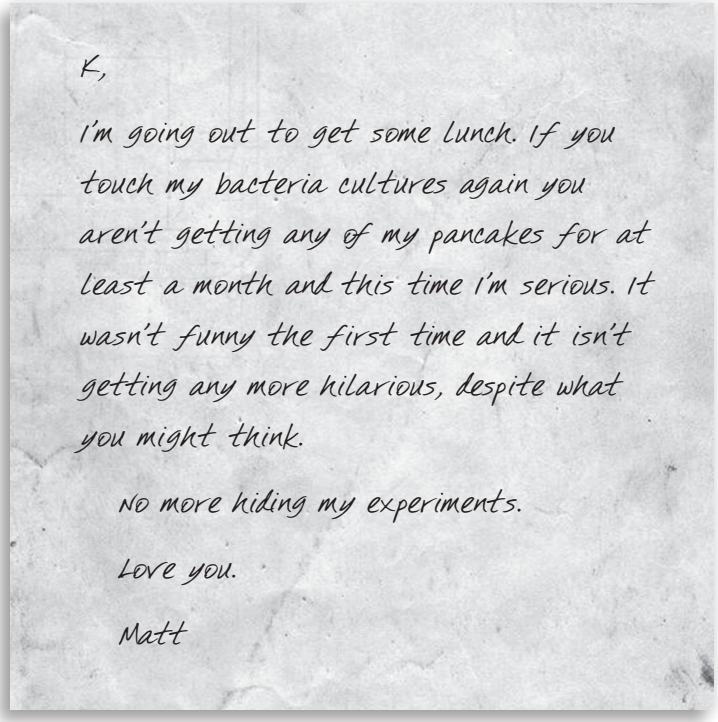
She could hear footsteps behind them, growing faster and faster, gaining on them.

They turned a corner and ducked into a room. Matthew locked the door behind them with trembling fingers. They stared at each other, listening for the sound of their pursuers. For a moment there was silence. They had a few minutes, but that was all. They were going to be found. It was just a matter of whether they could finish their task first.

"Next time, we're moving somewhere hot and quiet before any of this happens," Katherine declared breathlessly.

"I like Spain," Matthew said and pulled her into one last, desperate kiss.

CHAPTER 1



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UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM CAMPUS, ENGLAND, 2039

Kate poured glycerol into a beaker, measuring out what she would need for that afternoon's experiment. She wasn't really in the mood for labs today, but it was only her second session of biology practicals since university had started and she couldn't miss it. It didn't help that she was the only person without a lab partner, so she had to do double the work of the other first-years. Not that she minded the extra work particularly. She'd just enjoy having someone to gossip with, which – judging by the crowd gathered by the ice machine – was all the other students were doing.

She was opening up her lab book on her tablet when a harried-looking supervisor tapped her on the shoulder. She dropped her stylus and turned around. At the same time, she stuck her hand into her pocket, fingers catching on the locket she'd stuffed in there last week when it had annoyed her while she was working at a fume cupboard.

The supervisor gestured to the boy standing beside her. "Here's your new lab partner. He's just transferred from chemistry. You can get him settled, can't you?"

Then the supervisor disappeared in a flurry of stress and steamed-up goggles to deal with another fresher, who had just managed to drop a beaker of something foul on the floor and then stand in it.

Kate stared at the boy.

"Hi," she said dubiously. She fished out the locket and put it back on.

He stared back at her, his expression indecipherable.

Then he nodded hello. He was wearing a tweed waistcoat, of all things, over a ratty band T-shirt. His light-brown hair hung over his eyes in a retro fringe that seemed to be based on something from the late noughties. She was delighted to note that despite his doubtful fashion choices he was exactly her type.

"Welcome to my lair. Make yourself at home." Kate gestured to the lab, which was filling with the soft scent of rotting manure. Near by, a cluster of the Ice-Machine Gossipers, lab coat sleeves over their noses, were gathered around the spillage, offering advice to the flustered supervisor.

Kate turned back to the boy, who'd dropped his lab coat onto the bench like he'd been waiting for her permission. The coat was sparkling new, and he'd apparently been using it as a kind of satchel, as he pulled out an assortment of notebooks and what looked like his *lunch* (in a *biology* lab; did he have no survival instincts at all?) from its depths. As he rescued an apple from where it had bounced across the floor, she found her gaze lingering on the way his hair curled over the back of his collar.

He actually blushed when he noticed her watching him – a vivid pink staining cheekbones that she was frankly jealous of. Bone structure like that was wasted on a *chemist*. Kate pulled off her goggles to cover up the fact that she'd been caught watching him. She fought for a moment to free them from their determined grip in her tangled red hair.

He had *blushed*? She wasn't sure what to do with that, actually. Was it a good thing, a guy blushing when you

looked at him? He might as well have a name tag saying, "Hi, I'm a shy, socially awkward scientist. Please don't look me directly in the eye or I might faint." Kate was just imagining him introducing himself as "a socially awkward scientist", his Scottish lilt skipping quickly over the words, when he cleared his throat and spoke.

"I didn't actually download a copy of the lab book. What experiment are we doing today?"

That was a bit odd. He sounded exactly as she had imagined he would: the same soft Scottish brogue. She frowned. Why had she assumed he would be Scottish?

"Cleaning up horse muck, by the look of it," she joked, glancing over at the students still gathered around the spillage.

He dimpled a smile at her, and relaxed a little as he pulled on his lab coat.

"What's your name?" he asked, looking her up and down. His eyes lingered on her lab-coat collar, which was decorated with badges and beads, but he didn't mention it. Which was good. He was hardly one to judge her for accessorizing her lab coat – there was half a ham sandwich poking out of *his* pocket. It should have been strange, but it wasn't.

"Kate Finchley," she said brightly, trying to convey a more normal aura.

His eyebrows rose in what looked like surprise at her answer. She wasn't sure why her name would be surprising.

"Matt," he replied. "Matt Galloway."

"Hi, Matt, nice to meet you. Welcome to biology, etc., etc. I know you from somewhere. Have we met before?" Or instead of being normal she could just act like his own

personal stalker. That worked too.

"We haven't met before. I would have remembered." He blushed again and then stammered, "I mean, I haven't even been to this country before. I moved here for university."

She eyed him speculatively. He must be particularly intelligent to have got permission to study abroad. Since Scotland had gained independence from England after the last world war, almost twenty years ago, it had been practically impossible to get permits to study internationally.

Hmm. He didn't seem like he was lying. Where did she know him from?

She should probably get back to work and give him a week or so to settle in before she began to torment him more by *chatting* to him any further, or doing something equally terrifying like nodding to him in the corridor. It was obvious he was completely overwhelmed by her raw sexuality – or that was what she was telling herself, anyway, and no one could prove otherwise. But she couldn't look away. There was something … *familiar* about him.

He made no attempt to say anything else, just looked at her, nonplussed. Kate was afraid to continue any line of conversation in case he actually died from the blood rushing to his face, but the silence was awkward, so eventually she said, "Why are you transferring over to biology, anyway?"

"There weren't as many explosions as I was hoping for in chemistry." It sounded like a prepared response; he'd probably been asked that question a lot recently.

"Well, there aren't nearly as many giant octopuses as you'd want in biology either, sorry."

He grinned. "Shame. How's the physics department here?"

She could sense him eyeing her, and she tried not to feel uncomfortable. Her grandmother had once described her as a perfect Pre-Raphaelite beauty, which she took to mean that her figure was a little too soft around the edges to conform to twenty-first-century perceptions of beauty, and her hair was a vivid shock of red. Sometimes people at school had teased her for being ginger, but she'd always loved her hair too much for it to bother her. Either way, she was secure in her body image a lot of the time, but it didn't stop her feeling self-conscious when there was a cute boy looking at her like she was the most interesting thing he'd seen all day.

"I'd give the physics lot six out of ten. There aren't enough brunets," she said. There'd been a disappointing mixers event in freshers' week.

He grinned again, and Kate smiled back. Then she said, "But I hear their MRI research rivals Cambridge's."

"I'll look into that, then. If the octopi don't work out."

"I'm sure they will. No sea monsters today, though. We're testing fertilizer effects on the development rates of bacteria cultures."

"Sounds a lot easier than chemistry labs. I had to bring an acid to boil. On my *first day*."

"Ouch. Well, I'll look after you today." She handed him a pair of latex gloves. Their hands touched, just slightly.