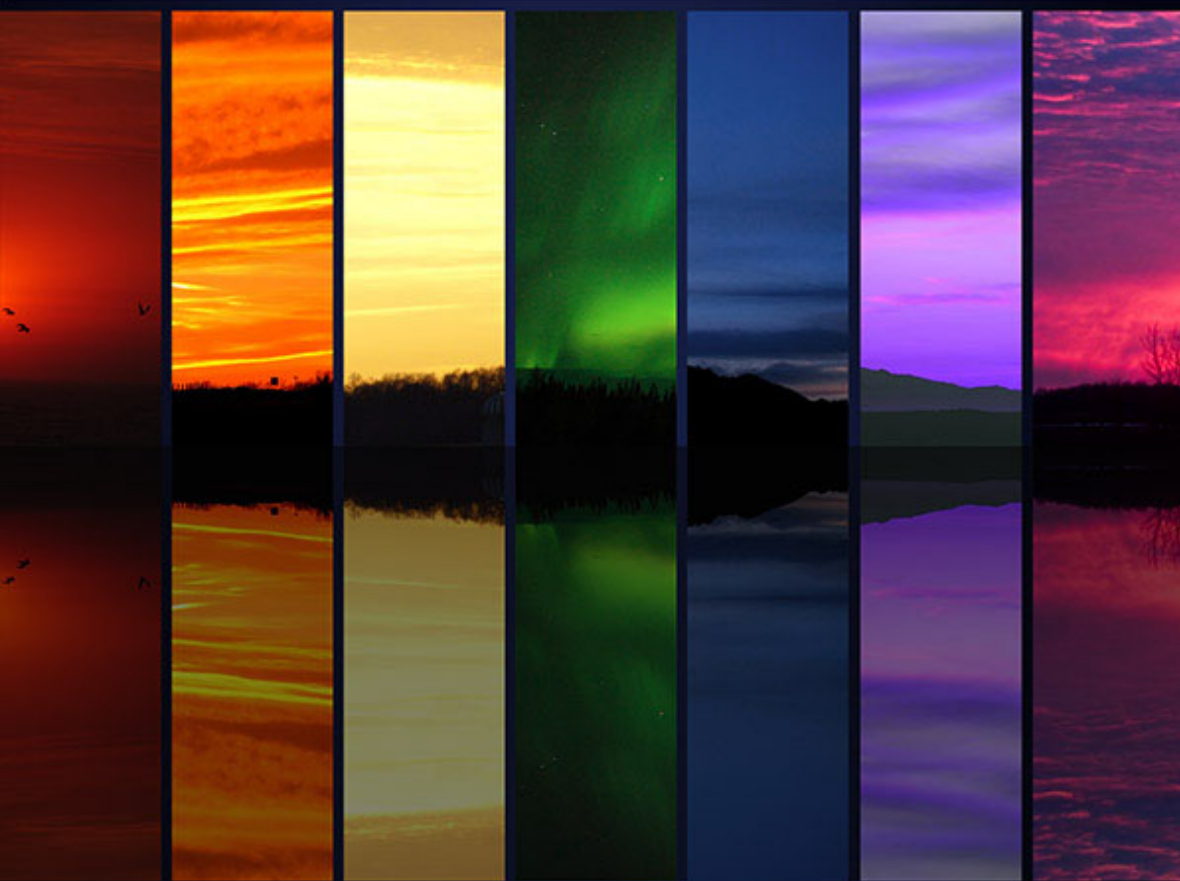


LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

# UN/COMMON GROUND

Arielle Pierce

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## UN/COMMON GROUND

**By Arielle Pierce**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# UN/COMMON GROUND

By Arielle Pierce

## Photo Description

A young Asian man is facing the camera, his arm over his head as he pulls his T-shirt off. His chest is bare, showing a fit body, and his expression is neutral. The photo itself is done with various vintage filters, giving the entire scene a dream-like quality.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Jamal is a university student in the USA from my country: Kazakhstan, which (much to my regret) is an extremely homophobic country, where most gay people get married to someone of the opposite gender and never admit to being gay, not even to themselves. Out gay people practically do not exist there.*

*His dad, who is paying for his education, (and also every other male he knows) says that all gays should just be shot dead.*

*All of his numerous relatives, except his older sister, who is closest to him and supports him, are in his face about finding a girl to marry. (Extended families in Kazakhstan are very close and do not believe there is such a thing as 'personal boundaries').*

*How does he get his HEA in these circumstances, when it is impossible in his country and as for where he studies, his student visa does not allow him to work and getting a job as a non-citizen without a working visa as well as a working visa without a job is, to say the least, very difficult?*

*Where and how would he find his true love?*

*I'd love to read that there is hope for a gay man in these very hostile circumstances to beat the odds and find real happiness.*

*Sincerely,*

*Asselle*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary, new adult

**Tags:** hurt/comfort, college, non-explicit, homophobia, artist, barista

**Word Count:** 22,995

*Acknowledgement*

A huge thank you to Asselle! Without all your help and patience this novella never could have been written. Thanks for putting up with all my questions!

# **UN/COMMON GROUND**

**By Arielle Pierce**



## Chapter One

It was the little things that were important to Jamal. The way the sun, golden with the morning, warmed him as he sat on his dorm bed, cross-legged with his psychology book on his lap, phone to his ear. The soft snores coming from the elderly little cat he rescued in the depths of the New York winter, so much more pleasant than the frightened meows that had first led him to her in the dark by the university library only weeks ago. The way his roommate groaned whenever he had to turn a page for his hated business degree. The feather-light touch of a lover's fingertips along the palm of his hand, fingers that traced the scar there from a childhood accident, fingers that trailed from his hands, to his arms. Fingers that ran over his chest, and pinched his nipple before traveling down his torso, always moving, always seeking, until they curled around dark hair, tugged the curls there. Fingers that...

"And your mother needs to talk to you before you go," his father said, thousands of miles away via the phone. "There's a lovely girl—remember Aizhana? Well, she's not gone through with her engagement to that—what was his name again? Well, yeah, that boy, he turned out to be a bit wild for her father, so they called the engagement off. So..."

Jamal shut his eyes, and he shut his ears.

He shut his mind, he shut down the anticipated mental barrage that would emanate from his father's mouth. *Why aren't you married? This girl is lovely, that girl is lovely. You should get a nice girl and settle down. How about getting married? Your mama is desperate to have grandchildren...* Once Papa had the bit between his teeth, there was no stopping him. Jamal loved him, but at times like this, it was best to daydream, to think of things he wanted to do, not things his parents felt he should do.

Like get married.

"Oh, and before I put your mother back on, that Serik boy got himself beaten up real bad the other day."

Serik? Really? That woke Jamal out of his pleasant haze. "What happened?"

Like he needed to ask.

"You know how those people are. He taunted some of our boys, our good boys, and they put him in his place. Why they didn't just put a bullet through

his brain is beyond me, would've been cleaner that way. At least the boys would be nice and warm in their homes right now instead of having to worry about if the police'll do anything about it. But why they would... Serik was just an animal, just a dumb animal."

Jamal shut his eyes, shut his mind off again. It was the only way.

The only way to survive.

Images of Serik teased the edges of his mind. The way he always laughed in the deep snow, like Saratoga Springs was expecting right now. The way he could out-dance everyone in the gay club they had dared to go to a few times. Serik was so brave, so very brave.

His father's voice hit that strident tone he always got, the almost-monologue that said he was onto his favorite subject, the condemnation of "people like that." Jamal preferred to concentrate on the way his tears tasted of salt, the way they warmed their path down his face, from his face and onto his hand, upturned to take the touch of love. Tears, a lover's fingers, it was all the same.

His eyes drifted to the picture of his two sisters that sat beside his desk. It was so much better to think of them when his father was like this, with their sea-green eyes that they—and Jamal—had inherited from their mother. Beside the picture was a single lily, a silly gift a friend from the LGBT group on campus had given to him after his friend had been given an entire bouquet. His friend's words rang in Jamal's ears, words to the effect that it was the least Jamal deserved, unattached as he was since he had taken up studies in America three years ago.

The translucent light coming through the petals, that too was a small gift. The way they highlighted fragility with strength, the way they were like Jamal himself.

"You getting ill? You sound ill."

"Just a runny nose, Papa, nothing more." No, nothing more.

After his father, it was his mother coming on to talk to him for the second time today. Was he okay? Did he need anything? Did he hear about Aizhana? She then launched into a sales pitch about how pretty Aizhana was, what a good cook her mother was, what a nice wife she would make someone one day soon. Jamal shouldn't have felt weary putting the phone down, but all the same, he did.

Across the room the bedsprings squealed. He looked up to Denis, his roommate, who was sitting up on his bed. "What was that all about? Papa being a dick again?"

Jamal rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "He can't help it, it's just the way he was taught to believe." This was an old argument between the two. They had asked to room together after meeting the first year as freshmen at Skidmore, as both were gay and both Russian-speaking. But the similarities pretty much ended there.

As if on cue, Denis rolled his eyes and slammed his book shut. "So crying once you're off the line with your folks is common, and I should just shut my mouth?"

"No. No, it's not that, it's just..." Images of Serik in happier times tumbled through Jamal's head. What would he be like now? Would he be the same or would he have changed, have been forced to change, either through fear—or through brain damage?

"Dude, you need to stay in this country. I'm not going back, no fucking way." He patted Jamal on the knee. "So *why* are you crying?"

"It's just a friend of mine, Serik. He was beaten up last night, badly. My papa thinks he got off lightly. He's in the hospital now."

"Fuck. I'm sorry." When Jamal looked up into Denis' eyes, he truly did look sorry. "It's a fucked-up world we live in, eh? Come on, let's go get a beer at Michael's. He should have a lot left over from last night's party." He stood up and patted Jamal on the shoulder before heading to the door. "Come on, you could use one."

Jamal stood up, but his heart wasn't into having a drink at only eleven in the morning. "I dunno..."

"Come on, dude. There's nothing else to do. We're supposed to get a blizzard sometime today. They've had weather advisories all over the place, saying to stay home if you're not working or whatnot. Too bad it's a Sunday, otherwise we might've gotten the day off school, eh?"

"Like you go to school anyways." Jamal eyed Denis like he was mad.

Without thought, he grabbed his coat on the way out. Maybe he could take a little walk in the woods by the campus. Cold air in his lungs would clear his thoughts a bit—more than a beer would. As they walked down the stairs, he

looked to the woods and to the town beyond. Alone, that's what he wanted to be.

"Hey Denis, I think I'm going to go for a walk. Can I meet you at Michael's?"

"You sure? You're not exactly dressed for the cold, y'know."

"I've got my coat, it'll be fine. Besides, this is nothing compared to what we're used to, right?" Jamal threw his coat on, well aware of the cold biting his legs and his face. America or not, it was bitter out.

Denis didn't look convinced. "Okay, just don't go too far. All kidding aside, there really is some bad weather heading our way."

"I won't be long. I'm just walking through the woods—maybe go into town for a little while. It's not like it's miles away. A coffee sounds better than a beer right now anyways."

"You just wanna look at the eye candy there. I know you." Denis grinned like a fool. "Poor Matthew, always working at the coffee shop."

"Well, you never know, maybe he's not there at all." Jamal blushed. He'd hoped his crush on the local barista, who came to a lot of the campus LGBT meetings, had gone unnoticed. "Besides, he's got a boyfriend—that skinny guy who is always spouting off."

"Dude, he got rid of that idiot months—hell, years—ago. Where have you been? Oh, yeah, thinking about making Mama and Papa happy and getting married, so you can have a life on the down low. Nice."

"Fuck off." There was no malice in Jamal's voice. So Matt wasn't dating? He tucked that tidbit into the back of his brain. "Okay, I'm going before this so-called blizzard hits." It would probably be nothing more than a few more feet of snow—which would make the walk back either very pretty or very tiring.

Before Denis could argue and try to convince him to come with him, Jamal waved his friend off and turned his back to the tall dorm building that had been his home for the past three years.

Once alone, the cold of New York's winter couldn't stop Jamal's fears. He tried to close his mind by taking in the view around him. The trees were heavy with soft snow, which buried him up to his knees. Too late he realized he hadn't put on the proper boots for this type of weather. He had his normal hiking shoes, but they couldn't keep the snow from gathering under his jeans,

and sticking to his socks. Ah well, maybe if he stuck to the sidewalks he wouldn't get so icy. Common sense said go back and hang out with Denis and Michael, but that just wouldn't do. The last thing he wanted was to be around those two. After the way Michael had drunk last night, the grad student would be hung over, and both would be gossiping and tut-tutting over his father. No, alone time was what he needed.

Angling through the woods, he struggled in the deep snow until it gave way to a recently plowed street. Thanks to the storm fears, the road was empty of cars, and Jamal was able to walk down it without worry. He should have been awed by the beauty of the scene, at the way the snow had turned a sleepy little village into some children's fairy tale. The quaint mansions with their gingerbread trimmings along the roofline were made for a scene such as this. But Jamal could not look out; his thoughts were all within. To Serik, to the beauty of Serik—perhaps lost. To his father, his hate so thick it could poison the purest dream.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

So there was a bit of snow on the ground. Matt snorted to himself as the latest customer complained about the two feet they had to trudge through to get to the coffee shop. He obviously was *not* a native Saratogian. Matt eyed the man from under his hair that was desperately in need of a cut, careful not to seem too much like he was amused by the man's behavior. The man was tall, with brown hair, brown eyes, brown clothes. And probably a brown life, if the way he sniffed at his surroundings was anything to go by. The girl next to him was little better, with her prim hairstyle and her fashionable big-city clothes.

Only five more hours to go. Matt did his best and tried not to look at the clock. *Uncommon Grounds* wasn't a bad place to work. His boss, Joe, was a good guy and, in typical Saratogian style, was laid back. But it wasn't the life surrounded by his sculptures that Matt had imagined for himself back at the New York Academy of Art all those years ago. Okay, so all of five years ago. And okay, so maybe it could still happen. It was just annoying that had he stayed back in NYC with his friends, he, too, would be well on his way to a career and have work in galleries instead of going back home to struggle and hang on—just—to a few hours a week in a rented studio. Being poor sucked. He sighed to himself as the steam from the lattes enveloped his head.

A blast of cold air indicated someone had entered the shop. Briefly Matt glanced up, more out of habit than curiosity. He looked back down at the lattes, until his brain registered who had just walked in. It was that Asian guy, the one with the exotic green eyes that Matt could lose himself in. The one who had been showing up with the funny Ukrainian guy at the LGBT get-togethers over on the campus. He walked along the long counter, past the glass display of cakes. The tiniest of silly grins played at the corner of Matt's mouth. This university student had been coming into his shop for well over three years now—not that he was counting—and he took Matt's breath away, every time.

Unfortunately, today his lean form was covered in his heavy parka. But at least there was his perfectly symmetrical face to gaze at, with his full lips, and long, elegant nose—and those eyes. Matt had never seen eyes like his. Clear green, with a black ring around the iris, and so exotic. Matt would have guessed him to be Japanese or Korean if he hadn't heard him speaking Russian at some of the meetings. He had never worked up the nerve to ask him where he was from.

He was so lost in his daydreams about the guy, that Matt didn't notice he looked as though he had been crying, until he was standing just behind the two New Yorkers. Shit. What now? Why had he been crying? It was all Matt could do not to drop the lattes on the two snobs and run around the counter to see what was wrong. Had someone tried to hurt him? Matt stared towards the door, but there was no sign of any menacing figures about. Hell, there was no one out. For once, everyone had listened to the weatherman.

Matt took the money from the New Yorkers and mentally wished them away from his counter, so he could see what was wrong with the student. When the young man stepped before him, the student tried to say something as he opened his mouth, but not a sound came out.

"You okay, man?" What else could Matt say? The student clamped his mouth shut and looked embarrassed.

There was an awkward silence between the two before the student opened his mouth again. "Just a... just a coffee please."

"Plain coffee?"

"Yeah."

"You never drink just plain coffee." No, more times than not he had *Uncommon Grounds'* justifiably famous hot chocolate. Or a mocha, and during last semester's finals, an espresso. But never plain coffee.

"How do you know?" Those beautiful green eyes widened.

Now it was his turn to be speechless. What should he say? "*I'm just your local cute, cuddly, stalker barista,*" might be just a touch frightening. "I uh... I just notice what everyone drinks, that's all. We're trained to know that... and I've seen you at the LGBT meetings over at Skidmore, so y'know... Everyone I see there I tend to make a mental note of what they drink when they come in." He smiled to try to look as friendly as possible—not scary, gay stalkerish, which is what he was afraid he looked more like at the moment.

Rather than answer, the student nodded and reached in his pocket to pay. He really looked the worse for wear. But, even rough around the edges, he was completely and utterly beautiful.

Clearing his throat—and trying to clear his mind from the pornographic place it really wanted to go right now—Matt said, "Hey man, tell you what, it's on the house."

The student looked up at him. “W-why?”

“‘Cause it’s a horrible day out, and you look as though you’ve gotten some bad news. So let’s just say you need it, eh?” Though he said a coffee, Matt was already beginning to prep the counter to make a hot chocolate. If he really did want that coffee he’d make it as well, just in case. “Tell you what. Just go have a seat, and I’ll bring it over to you, okay?”

Thankfully, the guy didn’t argue. He nodded and walked along the counter until he found the table tucked beside the newspaper rack, in the corner. It was dark there, no wonder he chose it. Matt watched him until it occurred to him that all he was doing was ogling, and making neither a coffee nor a hot chocolate. *Your friendly, stalker barista. Yep. That was him.* Bending to his task, he made two hot chocolates, and forgot all about the coffee. There was only the two of them, the big city couple, and feisty old Ms. Feinstein, sitting by the window and watching the snow settling softly over the old Victorian main street.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the student. The guy’s eyes were trained on the wooden table before him. Never once did he look up and see Matt watching him. *Poor kid. Wonder what happened to make him so upset? Hell, what happened to make him come all the way into town?* It wasn’t like Skidmore College was just up the street. Matt always took the car when he went there, but then again, he was a lazy bastard.

Drinks done, he took them in hand and walked around the long counter. When he put them down, the kid looked up and tried for a smile that just ended up looking like he had a toothache. Not waiting for him to say anything, Matt slid into one of the empty chairs.

“I don’t think I’ve introduced myself before, but I’m Matt.” He held out his hand. “And you’re...?”

“J-Jamal.”

The student, Jamal,—*what a nice name*—took his hand and shook it. His grip was firm, and Matt had to scold his mind for wandering off into that dark corner that wondered what that hand would feel like wrapped about his cock. *NoNoNo*, now was so not the time to be thinking this way. He would have kicked himself—if kicking himself didn’t look just a bit weird to someone who didn’t know him. He tried instead for a smile, which was marginally better than Jamal’s.



"You're brave, coming out on a day like today." Matt kept his tone light, in case Jamal would take offense.

"I just..." Jamal waved his hand in the air. "I needed some fresh air, to clear my head a bit." Matt nodded to keep him talking. Jamal eyed him for a moment and nibbled on his lower lip. He struggled with his words before he blurted out, "A friend is hurt, badly hurt. He's in the hospital."

The monologue that was about to start in Matt's head came to a screeching halt. "Wait... what? Your friend? He's hurt? In the hospital?" Who was Jamal's friend? Matt tried to recall the morning headlines in *The Saratogian*, but he didn't remember seeing anything about an accident serious enough to send anyone to the hospital. Maybe his friend had been in a car and...

"Back home, back in Kazakhstan. He was injured last night." Jamal held his hand over his face.

"Shit. I'm sorry." What did you say to something like that? Matt reached up to rub his chin, feeling the stubble there. He really needed a shave, but it had been so cold that any hair, even a little on his face, was welcomed. Even if it meant he was beginning to look like a cub.

"It's okay. You didn't do it." Jamal looked up at the photographs of racehorses that lined the walls. "No, it wouldn't happen here, what happened to my friend."

A heavy silence settled on them. Matt reached out for something—anything—to say. "Where did you say you're from again?"

"Kazakhstan."

"Where the fuck is that?" Matt clamped his hand over his mouth. "Sorry, I didn't mean to say that."

Jamal gave him a sad smile. "It's between China in the east and Russia in the north."

"Oh. Sorry, I'm really bad at geography." Matt really should've spent more time listening in on his history classes in high school, instead of swooning over the star quarterback who sat just in front of him. But how would he have known, ten years ago, that someone he was attracted to could possibly be from such an exotic place?

When he saw a tear trace down the well-worn path on Jamal's cheek, he couldn't stop himself. He reached out and wiped it away. Jamal blushed and

pulled away. Matt held up his hands. "Sorry, man. Sorry, my bad. It's just a reaction. I hate to see anyone upset." He smiled, hoping that would take away any fear that he was some pervert type ready to jump the poor guy.

Jamal's smile was as watery as his tears. "That's okay."

Matt sat back and took a sip of his drink. He glanced at Jamal's, piled high with whipped cream like he always seemed to like it. Jamal glanced at it and then lifted it to his lips as well. Over the rim of his cup, he looked at Matt. His eyes were so green, so beautiful, that Matt found himself holding his breath. What he wouldn't do to be able to wake up next to Jamal, and have him looking at him with those green eyes, instead of here in this dark coffee shop, with the failing light and the bickering New Yorkers.

"So what happened?" His voice was soft.

Jamal shook his head. "I don't know, really. My father called. He told me right before he got off the phone. He thought it was funny. He was laughing."

Fuck. "Really? What the fuck? *How* could he find it funny?" Matt stared at him with his mouth hanging open.

Jamal nodded. "Yeah, as you say. What the fuck?"

"But why?" Not that he wanted to make things worse for Jamal, but Matt couldn't stop his curiosity.

"He's like us. My friend is." Jamal said in a quiet tone, almost a whisper. "H-he's like us at the meetings, except more brave."

"So *that's* why he was hurt? What the fuck?"

"In my country, it's considered wrong. You're 'against nature' to be this way. There's something wrong up here." He tapped the side of his head.

"*Really?* Shit." Okay. So Matt knew it wasn't sunshine and roses everywhere. Even so, it was always hard to face the reality of a lot of gay men's lives outside the liberal areas of the world. "So I take it you're living here full time now?"

Jamal shook his head. "My sister wants me to, but I have no choice. I must go back."

"But why?"

Sighing, Jamal waved a hand in the air. "Firstly, my visa. If I stay, I will be illegal, as I'm only on a student one. Second, family. The only reason I'm here

at all is because my father is paying for college. If I don't go home and start earning it back, he'll be very angry."

"So?"

Jamal dropped his hand to the table and looked at Matt. "What do you mean 'so'?"

"So what if your dad's pissed off? He's the one who laughed at your friend being hurt." Matt thought that would have been obvious.

Jamal bit his lower lip and in a small voice said, "Yeah, but he's my papa. He's my family."

Matt blew out between his teeth. "I-I think I get it. My mom's a pain in the ass, but I still love her."

"Family's family." Jamal gave him an apologetic smile. "It's better there... in some ways."

Yeah, like having a homophobe of a dad laugh because your best friend has been hospitalized. Matt's family wasn't perfect, but right now he'd take them, hands down, over Jamal's.

A different, sharper voice cut into their conversation. "Matt!"

He looked away from Jamal to the source. Ms. Feinstein was looking back at him from her normal seat by the large windows at the front of the shop. She was glancing out, and then looking at him with a worried expression.

"What's up, Ms. Feinstein?" If she had that look on her face, then he knew to be worried himself, as nothing ever bothered her. It was then that he noticed the light had taken a funny turn outside. Even the New York couple had stopped bickering to look up the long, narrow room to her.

"Think there's a blizzard coming. An actual blizzard. Not one of those namby-pamby snows the folks on the Weather Channel are always yammering on about." She looked away from her audience once more to stare outside.

"Right." *Well, shit, what now?* He glanced at Jamal, but the boy was the only one not looking and had trained his gaze back to the table.

Matt hesitated for a moment, wondering what to do. The New York couple were looking confused; Jamal uninterested. No wonder. Matt supposed the beating of a good friend was more important than some piss-poor weather. He glanced up at the clock on the wall behind the counter. It read twelve-thirty.

*Too early to close up. But suppose he called his boss? Yeah, that would be the best thing to do.*

"Be right back," he told Jamal as he stood up. Catching the eye of the couple, he said, "You guys might want to head back to where you're staying. Is it in town?"

"A B&B just off the Main Street, towards the racetrack. I forgot the name of it," the man said, looking worried.

"You need to get going. Just in case we get a whiteout." Matt smiled, to take the edge off his voice.

The man sat, looking rather stunned by the change in weather. His wife nudged him and stood up. "You heard the man. Get your ass in gear or spend the night here by yourself."

It occurred to Matt that Jamal had a much longer walk back than the rest of them. Ms. Feinstein lived close by the coffee shop, so it wouldn't be any big deal for her to get home, though it was slippery out via Caroline Street. Matt bit his lip, trying to figure out how to get her home safely and get the big city couple to move. They were still just standing there, not getting their coats on or anything else. Talking to each other like nothing was wrong.

And then there was Jamal. Matt couldn't leave him to try and struggle all the way back to Skidmore on his own. Maybe he could come back with Matt, and then Matt could try and drive him back? But what if he got stuck? The light outside the windows was already turning a very funny color, which meant the blizzard was almost on them. He blew his breath out of his nose, then made up his mind.

"Ms. Feinstein, don't head off alone. I'll make sure you get back okay."

"I'm eighty-three years old, boy. If I've made it this long on my own, I'm sure a few more minutes won't be any big deal." Though her voice was acid, he noted she didn't look like she was about to go out on her own.

He looked at the couple. "We're going down Caroline Street. If your B&B is close by, you can come part way with us, but if it isn't, honestly, I can't tell you how much you need to get your asses in gear, *right now*. It's gonna be a whiteout pretty damn soon."

That spurred the woman into motion. "Come on, Mike, you'd make a pretty shitty snowman." The man—Mike—never said a word, but meekly put his coat on and began to get his computer and newspaper together to leave.

Through all that, Jamal looked completely unconcerned about the events outside.

“Don’t tell me, let me guess. This is spring-like weather back home?” Matt couldn’t help but grin. This probably *was* nothing if you were from almost-Russia.

That at least brought out a teasing smile from Jamal. Matt’s heart did a funny little flutter that had nothing to do with the bad weather. Jamal was *so* damn pretty. Matt had to tear his eyes away and turn towards the phone. Over his shoulder, he said, “I need to call my boss, then we’ll see about getting you home.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Three

Jamal watched Matt walk away, muttering some words about a boss and closing up before the storm hit. Across the way, the sophisticated couple wrapped themselves up tight in their winter gear and walked towards the front of the building, their footsteps creaking on the slatted wooden floor. Ms. Feinstein stood by the glass pane that was the front of the building, looking out, her face showing concern. Jamal too, looked towards the window. The strange glow was beginning to darken. The snow would be upon them any moment. A glance at his phone told him that his brother would be calling any time now, and his eldest sister after him. It was like that every day, first his parents in the late morning, when he had a break between classes, and then his brother two hours later, followed by his eldest sister. His other sister would call in the evening to check in on him, followed by his two cousins still at home, and one more call from his mother, who would do one last check in to make sure he was alright.

He should've been putting his coat on and going back, but something kept him in his seat. Matt grinned at him from behind the counter, before turning away, no doubt talking to his boss. It was that grin, along with that face, that was keeping him sitting here. Denis would be rolling his eyes at him, if only he could see the scene right now.

Jamal had been aware—painfully aware—of Matt going on three years. But the older man had always seemed too popular at the LGBT meetings on campus. Always surrounded by other men, who looked nothing like Jamal. And there had been that time when he *had* had a boyfriend, even though Denis said they weren't together now. But Jamal wasn't anything like the type that always seemed to hang around Matt. He was just a bit too short, a shade too exotic, a bit too soft-looking, in a world that wanted high-testosterone, muscle-bound men.

Matt was everything that was popular with the crowd at school. Tall, muscular, rugged without seeming like he should be shooting small animals in the woods. His hair was almost as dark as Jamal's, and longer, shaggy around a chiseled face. His eyes were dark and warm, and always held a kind light in them. He could have anyone he wanted.

Jamal sighed. No doubt Matt was only being nice with the hot chocolate. He did note, with a shy little smile to himself, that the coffee he had asked for

hadn't been given to him, but the hot chocolate, with just the right amount of whipped cream, had come in its place. So maybe Matt *had* taken notice of him. But no, come to think of it, he probably did only make note of who liked what and when—like he had said.

Jamal shut his eyes, suddenly too tired to move after the emotions of the past two hours. Serik hurt, possibly brain damaged, and here he was, sitting in a warm cafe, enjoying the safety being in New York brought him. It wasn't fair. Of all people, it should have been Serik here. Laughing, enjoying the prospect of more snow on the ground. Jamal made a mental note to go over to the local racetrack once the snow had stopped. Serik would have loved that most of all, the Victorian buildings buried under the feathery snow. One year he'd get to come back early enough to actually see the races. See the town heaving with all the tourists and racing fans who came from everywhere to watch all the famous horses for six weeks every July and August. Every summer, his family always demanded that he return home. No doubt to be watched over, in case he did something as terrible as fall in love.

He sighed again and looked into the white mug before him, watching the way the last of the chocolate had stuck to the sides of the cup, along with a ridge of cream.

"Hey. You okay?"

He looked up to see Matt smiling at him, though the smile didn't reach his eyes. No, they looked worried. About the weather, or about him. Jamal wasn't sure. In case it *was* for him, Jamal smiled and nodded. "I need to get going, eh?" Even though he didn't want to, he stood up and began putting his coat on. Looking down, he saw that the bottoms of his trousers were wet from sitting in the warm coffeehouse. He *had* known this was going to happen. Nonetheless, he couldn't stop his sigh of frustration.

A light touch on his arm caught his attention. "Hey, wait a minute," Matt said. When Jamal looked again at the taller man, there was real concern in his eyes, and Jamal was sure it was all for him. "You can't walk all the way back to Skidmore in this. You could get lost in the storm, and—and I've got a better idea."

Jamal held his breath. "Yes?"

"Help me walk Ms. Feinstein home, and then just come to my place and spend the night. I mean..." Jamal felt a little thrill as a bright blush crept up Matt's cheeks as he spoke. *Could that mean...?* No, he couldn't let himself go there. Matt was just a nice guy and didn't want him to take the risk.

"That's very kind of you, but I can't take advantage of your kindness. I'll be fine." Jamal hated to say those words, but it was true. This *was* only a bit of snow, nothing worse than he would have seen back home. And the wet trousers. Well, that was his own fault. Three winters in New York, and he was growing soft.

"Oh no," came Ms. Feinstein's voice by her spot at the window.

Both men looked up as the coffeehouse was plunged into darkness. Outside, the wind rose into a howl. What had been buildings and bare trees a moment before, was just a swirl of white now. The only object that could still be seen was the stoplight, and that was because it was just outside the coffeehouse.

"Well, that settles it. You're coming home with me. No arguments," Matt said. He gave Jamal a little clap on the shoulder. "Don't worry, you can have the sofa, and I don't snore—though my cat does."

He really shouldn't have felt as excited by those words as he did. But Jamal couldn't help the sneaky little smile playing at the corners of his lips. Ms. Feinstein was all but hopping from foot to foot in her anxiety, so he nodded to Matt and followed him to the front of the building.

When they were at Ms. Feinstein's side, Matt said, "Okay you two, I need to shut everything off and set the alarm." He looked guilty as he added, "For that you both have to stand outside for a minute. I'm sorry."

"Oh, honey, I think your friend here and I can stand a little bit of snow." Ms. Feinstein's words belied the state of the weather outside.

Jamal smiled wryly at her idea of a bit of snow. Even the stoplight was lost from sight now. He jumped when Ms. Feinstein put her gloved hand in his.

"No use losing you in this, is there?" She smiled and squeezed his hand.

"It's not that bad out."

"Right, just a bit of snow." She winked at him, as they walked out.

"Sorry guys, I'll be as quick as I can." Matt's face was full of contrition.

It wasn't his fault. Jamal grinned at him, but probably all Matt saw were his eyes peeking out from the collar of his coat. He seemed to like his eyes, Matt did. Or at least he was always seemed to be looking at them whenever Jamal looked up from his hot chocolate. That was one thing they should have done—brought re-fills to keep their hands warm. His hand in Ms. Feinstein's was cold in just the few seconds they stood by the large pane of glass that encompassed the front of the store.



Jamal glanced in at the giant coffee grinder that took up the entire wall of the building on the side where the counter was. It was a lovely thing, but now was not the time to be thinking of it. As he looked out onto the street, he realized it was going to take both him and Matt, one on either side of Ms. Feinstein, to see her back to her house safely. The wind was forcing the flinty snow to fly in one direction, creating the conditions they were experiencing, but also making the pavement icier than it had been just an hour ago. He squeezed her hand, thinking it would be felt as reassurance.

"Don't worry, son, we'll get back okay." She squeezed his hand back.

"Okay!" Matt stepped out of the shop, wrapped from the top of his head to his knees in winter garb. They both moved closer to him, their faces all but huddled together against the wind and the snow.

"Here's what I think we should do," said Matt, taking Ms. Feinstein's free hand. "Let's go down Main towards Caroline, turn and go up the hill from there."

"What about just taking the alley that runs towards the library?" Ms. Feinstein's voice was all but carried off by the wind.

Jamal couldn't help but wonder why they hadn't formed a plan while they had been inside, where it was warm. Every second out here was taking away what little heat they had. And he had foolishly left his apartment without either a hat or a scarf. The hood of his coat wasn't helping much in this wind.

When he glanced up, Matt was shaking his head. "I don't want to take a chance of one of us falling. That alleyway's too steep in this."

"Can we just go?" Jamal was mortified when he realized that had been him making that sad little plea. But he couldn't help it. In addition to his ears starting to go numb, his lower legs were, decidedly, freezing from being wet. He couldn't begin to express to Matt how grateful he was that he could stay with him and didn't have to go all the way back to campus in this.

Matt looked at him for a second, and then he took off his ski hat and handed it to Jamal. "Dude, you should've told me you didn't have much gear on." Before Jamal could protest, Matt had let go of Ms. Feinstein for a moment and dug into his coat pocket, producing another, smaller ski cap. "Never leave home without three or four in this weather." His eyes crinkled up into a smile.

"Okay, let's go!" Ms. Feinstein re-took his hand and all but dragged the boys behind her. "Freezing to death doesn't sound like a good way to die."

They walked down the street, initially in the direction of Jamal's campus. Only, his home was too far away now. All the Victorian buildings were snow lashed and huddled in the cold, the shops closed, or in the process of closing. The only people they saw were shop workers trying to get home before it got worse.

Jamal glanced to his right when they walked by the little alleyway Ms. Feinstein had been talking about. Between the two buildings and the blizzard, the road fell into darkness. He was glad Matt had vetoed that idea. Surely at least one of them would have broken something going down through there. On they trudged, the wind, more than once, whipping around their ankles and forcing one of them to almost go down. Jamal was a bit ashamed to admit it was him or Matt, more times than not, that was rescued from a hard landing by Ms. Feinstein. He was beginning to wonder who was escorting whom back to their place.

When they passed the large green building that housed a fancy restaurant, the wind caught them in the open area of the parking lot. The viciousness of the storm took his breath away, and he felt the pressure of Ms. Feinstein squeezing his hand. He squeezed back, slightly worried that he was beginning to lose the feeling in his fingers. The wind pulled at his legs, numbing them where they had been wet. The frozen denim cut into his knees, making every step painful. Why hadn't he, at the very least, put on his thermals before he had set out? Yes, Serik had been hurt, but even so, he never should have stumbled out so unprepared.

Not a moment too soon, Caroline Street came into view. The pavement down the hill was completely covered in snow. The road was a little better. Their line stopped, as they looked at the state of it. Jamal couldn't stop the miserable shiver that went down his spine. No way could they get Ms. Feinstein down that street in safety.

Matt must have reached the same conclusion. Shuffling until they were once again a little huddle, he shouted over the wind, "We need to get to Lake. That street should be clearer than this one, okay?"

Jamal had no choice but to nod. He tried to close his mind off to the way his legs were feeling like two clumsy blocks from the knee down and instead concentrated on what they needed to do. They needed to get Ms. Feinstein home safely. If she were to fall in this... No, Jamal's mind just couldn't go there. There had been enough sadness for one day already. At least the buildings on this stretch of the street had been built close together, and that kept them sheltered from the wind.

The group stopped when they got to Lake Avenue. Jamal squinted, but he couldn't make out the imposing red brick building that was only across the street. When he looked towards the even more impressive Post Office, likewise, there was nothing to be seen but white snow. The wind roaring up the avenue took the heart out of him. It was—once again—Ms. Feinstein tugging on his hand that woke him from the heavy feeling.

“Come on, we have no choice.” She was also tugging on Matt.

“We could go back,” he suggested.

She shook her head. “I want the warmth of my own bed, and this boy is freezing and needs a hot bath. I can feel his hand shivering through my mitten.”

Matt looked from her to Jamal, his eyes full of concern. “You okay, Jamal? It's not too long now.” Reaching out, he briefly rubbed Jamal's arm. Turning his attention away, he nodded, “Let's get in the middle of the road. No one's fool enough to be driving in this, and it's, at least, cleared off.”

Not one to disagree—particularly when he was freezing to death—Jamal shuffled out with the other two, breathing a sigh of relief when the icy footing gave way to firmer pavement. The salt trucks must have been by recently, by the look of the road. The slope of the hill wasn't severe and they all managed to keep their footing, but there was nothing to stop the full impact of the wind. Jamal could feel it literally sucking the air he needed to breath. Moisture from his eyes was turning to ice on his eyelashes. Lost as he was, he just hung onto Ms. Feinstein's hand and let them do the guiding. When they got to the intersection, Matt and Ms. Feinstein decided to backtrack slightly, as the smaller buildings along Maple would give them some protection from the wind. Jamal was feeling so sleepy, he barely registered the left onto Caroline Street.

When the shop buildings gave way to homes, Jamal wanted to weep. Maybe they would make it after all. He had been beginning to doubt it. The road became more treacherous, but sheer determination saw them up the rise of the hill. He never saw such a welcoming sight as the two grand old homes that stood sentinel on Circular Street. The wind had lightened up just that bit, so there was more to be seen.

“We're almost there,” Ms. Feinstein said in his ear. Over her shoulder, he saw the concerned eyes of Matt. As much as he wanted to tell him—tell them both—that he was okay, Jamal just couldn't muster the energy. And his brain couldn't seem to figure out the words he needed to say. All it wanted to do was chant “cold” over and over, like some horrid mantra.

"It's just left of here." Now it was Matt's turn to shout in his ear.

Jamal nodded, but once stopped, he found he couldn't make his feet move another step. His mind was fuzzy, and when he tried to command it to follow Matt's orders, it was no use. He simply couldn't walk another step.

There was a shake on his arm, but even that barely registered. Another shake and then Matt's face appeared slightly below his chin. As he tried to puzzle that out, Matt spoke. "Hey, Ms. Feinstein's is just down this street. I'm gonna run her down, you stay right here." He pointed to the ground, like Jamal could actually move from the spot he was rooted to. "Right here, I'll be right back, okay? Just stay right here, I'll get you home and warm. We're only a couple of blocks from my place." One more pat on the arm, and he was gone.

Jamal blinked when his brain registered that he was alone. How'd that happen? He felt like a drunk man as he tried to piece together what Matt had said. Something about a house—his house? Or Ms. Feinstein's house? Jamal couldn't remember. He had said to stay here, hadn't he? But why? The wind was tearing at him, mocking him. A normal Kazakh would have laughed in the face of this weather, but not him. Maybe his papa was right, maybe there was something wrong with people like him.

But Matt was the same, Matt was like him. And he had seemed to be just fine in this blizzard. So why was that? He stared stupidly at the lemon-yellow building before him and pondered that thought. It really was a pretty building, all of the ones in Saratoga were. It was just the sort of home his mama and papa would want. A huge home where all their children and grandchildren could cluster around them. Grandchildren, that's really what his parents wanted, lots and lots of grandchildren to fuss over. And marriage, he'd have to marry someone to make that dream come true for them.

Just as he was mulling that over, there came a gentle pressure around his shoulders and behind his knees. Before he could get his sluggish mind to concentrate, he was being lifted off the ground and into the arms of someone much taller and stronger than him.

Matt.

He would have kissed him... if he had the strength. All he *could* do was say, "You remembered me," and lay his head against Matt's shoulder. Matt's body felt so strong, so safe.

"Of *course* I remembered you, silly. Like I'd forget. Let's just get you home and warm, hey?" Not waiting for an answer and stealing away the seconds that Jamal needed to get warm again, Matt headed down the street.

Jamal dully noted that they seemed to be in the middle of the street. There were cars lined up on either side of them, all covered with the same icy snow that hit his body like tiny bullets. But it was okay now, he was safe, now. Shutting his eyes, he concentrated on the way Matt walked, so sure of his footing. Never once did he stumble and jar Jamal's weary body. A part of his brain registered that he couldn't feel his legs, nor his hands. All he wanted to do was shut his eyes and fall into sleep. Then Matt seemed to be climbing, he put Jamal down onto his own two feet. Jamal couldn't feel a thing. His legs were like two blocks of wood that began where his knees ended.

But then they were inside. The wind tearing at him was gone, the bitterly cold flecks of snow gone. In the sudden silence, his ears rang. Ahead there were more stairs. Vaguely Jamal felt Matt's arms under his knees and shoulders once again, and a slight jarring as Matt fumbled for the lock to his apartment. Jamal had never been so glad to see a soft sofa, as Matt placed him on it.

"Just a sec... we'll get you all better in a sec."

Jamal struggled to open his eyes as Matt unzipped his coat and tried to get him out of it. Jamal's mind lay in a strange haze, rendering thought a particularly odd thing. *Layers* was a concept too hard for his brain at the moment. All he could think about was the warm air on his face and the feeling of his eyelashes thawing out. Once freed of the coat, he could also feel something soft rubbing against his arm. He opened his eyes as Matt made shooing noises, and saw a huge ball of fur with a tail and two yellow eyes jump down off the sofa.

He thought he said "cute cat" but the words seemed to come out all the wrong way. Matt shot a look up at his face and said, "My god Jamal, I'm sorry I didn't know *before* we set out how unprepared you were for the blizzard. I would've dressed you up better had I been paying more attention." He could feel Matt tugging at his shoes and socks. He was grateful he hadn't died in the blizzard. That would have taken a lot of explaining to his family, had he allowed some American snow to kill him.

"Okay, you lay there a minute, let me get some warm water to put your feet in." The floorboards creaked as Matt stood up.

"Like I can go anywhere." Like he'd want to. Jamal closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling of just being.

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## Chapter Four

Poor Jamal! Matt kept stopping and just staring at the guy, even though he knew he needed to get his ass in gear. That coat was just too thin for the likes of the blizzard raging outside—*Jamal, what the fuck were you thinking?*—and the boy had no hat and no scarf. The only sensible thing he had worn were his gloves. But Matt was appalled when he saw that Jamal had not only gone without any long johns, but he'd also gone without boots, which meant his jeans had gotten wet, along with his socks. When he took Jamal's socks off, he was distressed to see that Jamal's feet were ice white.

*Please god, no frostbite. Please no frostbite.* That was the last thing they could deal with. Even though the hospital was just on the other side of town, Matt doubted they would come out this way in the next few hours to deal with frostbite. He was sure there must be bigger idiots out there in more trouble than him and Jamal.

Sighing, he set about making things better for Jamal. The boy had all but fallen asleep. The only way Matt knew he was still somewhat awake was the fact that his head didn't fall back onto the pillows behind his back.

At least Ms. Feinstein was okay. Matt had to snort at that thought. He had been so worried about her safety that it had never occurred to him that Jamal had been in distress. No, not until that horrible moment when Jamal had seemed simply unable to move another step. That horrible moment when Matt had realized he had to leave him standing in the blizzard, while he got Ms. Feinstein to her front door without slipping and falling. So much for thinking that everyone from any of the former Soviet states was hard as nails and able to take anything American weather had to throw at them.

He chided himself at his mean little thought. Maybe if Jamal hadn't fled his place after his asshole dad had just told him his friend had been all but murdered. Maybe then he would have dressed for the weather. More likely, he wouldn't have come out at all. *Shut the fuck up, man.*

It was better to think about the task at hand. Like how to keep Jamal from getting frostbite, and how to get him warm again. He got a basin of lukewarm water and placed Jamal's feet in it.

After a few silent minutes of staring at the slender feet and the way that even Jamal's toes were graceful looking, Matt looked up at him. "You getting any feeling back in them?"

"Yes," Jamal muttered through gritted teeth. He looked more awake than he had a few minutes ago, a good sign if Matt ever saw one.

"Any pain?"

"Just a bit." Jamal opened his eyes to look at Matt, his gaze becoming clear again, that sleepy look from the landing gone.

"Can you feel this?" Matt pinched one of Jamal's toes.

"Oh!"

"Good, no frostbite then." Thank god for that. "How's your fingers?"

"I think I'm going to get to keep them." Jamal held them up for inspection. As they looked much better than his feet, Matt put them out of mind.

He gave Jamal an apologetic smile. Jamal's toes were beginning to show some color again. He just needed to get a warm bath running for him. And something hot to drink. And he had to get Jamal out of his soaked jeans. He still couldn't believe he had walked out with only them. If he ever met Jamal's dad, there were going to be words.

"I'm really sorry."

"Uh, what?" Matt snapped out of his vengeful thoughts and looked up. "What're you sorry for?"

Jamal's voice was a lot more blurry than his. He seemed to struggle with just the simple words. "For being like this." He nodded towards his white feet. "For going out so unprotected."

"Hey, it could happen to any of us. Besides, you were in no state to think about dressing for the weather. And let's face it, I'm sure this is nothing—weather-wise—for you, if you're from around Russia."

"You'd think." Jamal had enough presence of mind to roll his eyes.

Matt gave his foot a little squeeze. "Hey, you've got a lot on your mind. You're allowed to fuck up like this. At least it ended well." Yeah, no one died. Maybe he should have insisted they all stay in the store when the storm hit.

Jamal must have been thinking along the same lines. "I hope that couple got back to their place okay."

"Yeah, me too." Matt gave him a miserable smile. But what could he have done? Maybe once he had Jamal all thawed out he'd call around to the B&Bs and make sure they had gotten back.

Giving Jamal a nervous look, Matt said, "I'm gonna go make us some strong coffee, but first I need to get you out of those wet jeans."

Instead of answering, Jamal nodded. Maybe Matt was daydreaming, but he swore he saw a little spark of excitement in Jamal's eyes at the prospect of Matt taking his pants off. Maybe. Nervously, Matt reached for the buttons of Jamal's fly. He gulped so loud he was sure Jamal had to have heard it. Trying hard not to brush against the bulge there, Matt got the fly undone. How many times had he fantasized about doing just this thing? It would be just his luck that it was only because Jamal was still too cold to do it himself. Life could be so cruel.

"Okay Jamal, I need you to lift your hips up, and I'll slide your jeans off. That sound okay?"

Oh, this *should* have been so erotic. Matt's cock certainly was thinking it already was. Biting the inside of his mouth, hard, Matt concentrated on just trying to make the guy feel warm and comfortable. *The very last thing Jamal needs is you getting pervy on him.* Thankfully Matt was hunched up, so the more obvious bulge in his own pants wasn't noticeable. Jamal gave a little shiver as his jeans slid off his hips, exposing a rather delicate part of his body, separated only by his boxers, and almost in Matt's face. It was all Matt could do not to bury his face there.

He was in a cold sweat by the time he had Jamal's pants off. They clung to his legs where they had gotten wet. Matt pulled the last of them with rather more vigor than he meant. Jamal gave a little *oof* as they landed on the floor with a wet sound.

"Damn, they were worse than I thought," Matt said, staring at them. It was easier to get himself in some sort of control that way. If he looked up now, from his position on the floor between Jamal's knees, he knew there'd be no way he could hide what he was feeling. "Let me go get you a blanket."

Scrambling up, Matt all but fled into the tiny alcove that served as his kitchen. Living on the top floor of one of Saratoga's various Victorian mansions certainly had its perks... but this wasn't one of them. Matt would have loved to have a dog—a nice furry husky—but that would have meant broken dishes and toppled furnishings every day in a place as tiny as this one. It was more a glorified studio than a proper apartment, just the living room, this pantry of a kitchen, a tiny bedroom, and another closet that had pretensions of being a bathroom. But it was home, and Matt loved it.

He rummaged through the laundry basket he had left sitting on top of the counter, until he found what he was looking for. A baggy pair of sweatpants,



probably far too big for Jamal, but they were dry, and they were soft and comfortable. And they had a drawstring, so if they were too large, Jamal could always use that to keep them up. As an afterthought, he also grabbed a throw blanket, an old afghan his grandmother had made for him once.

Taking a few deep breaths, he forced his body under control before walking back into the living room. Jamal was watching him, his eyes much clearer than even a few minutes ago. "You can put these on," he said, holding up the old blue sweatpants. "But in the meantime, I thought you could just throw this over your lap, to preserve your modesty and all that."

"Thank you, for everything." A perfect little blush colored Jamal's cheeks as he tucked the blanket around his hips.

Matt could feel the hot flush of embarrassment on his face. Perhaps Jamal hadn't noticed him staring as he had placed the blanket around himself. "I'll get the coffee," he said by way of escape. That would be better than fantasizing about poor Jamal, in his cute boxers, sitting half naked on his sofa. How many times had he played *that* scenario out in his mind in the past three years? *Listen dickhead, the guy has just found out a close friend had the shit beat out of him, and he's turned around, and almost got himself in a whole lot of trouble. So reel it in a bit, won't you, brain?*

The coffee beans were the same as at work. One of the perks of working at *Uncommon Grounds*, in Matt's opinion. That, and it was a rather fun job. Where else would he have become friends with Ms. Feinstein and all the other regulars that came in every day? The only time it was a pain was during the racing season, when the line to get a drink was out the door, literally. Even when the Starbucks had come to town and set up just a block down from them, there was no dip in their popularity. *Score one for the small business.*

"Coffee'll be ready in a second," he called out to Jamal, before he remembered that his guest didn't much like coffee. Peeking a guilty face around the corner he added, "Unless you want a tea or something else?"

"Coffee's fine, just please... a lot of sugar and even more milk." Jamal finally looked warm, huddled under the blanket. Matt noticed that he had pushed it up under his chin so all of him, bar two very white feet, was hidden from view.

Just as well. Anything to make him concentrate on the task at hand, which was to make sure Jamal was okay. He'd get something warm inside him, and then get him in a warm bath. *And to bed, never forget bed.* Matt grumbled at his brain. Of course Jamal needed a place to sleep. He peeked around the corner as

the coffee began dripping into the pot. The best thing would be to give Jamal his bed and take the sofa. That was the gentlemanly thing to do. Matt grinned a bit as he indulged in the image of himself as a country gentleman, Jane Austen style.

"I think I'm going to thaw out." Jamal rolled his beautiful green eyes as Matt walked in, two coffees in hand.

"Thank god for that." Matt offered him the bigger mug as he sat down beside him, aware for the first time of his own wet jeans and almost-numb toes. When he glanced down at his fingers, he saw that they were almost the same color as Jamal's feet. "I should call Ms. Feinstein in a bit, make sure she's okay."

"Thank you for getting me back." Jamal's voice was tinged with embarrassment. "I never should have gone out with so few layers on."

Matt couldn't resist a bit of teasing. "Yeah, now I may not know much about your country, but I'm assuming it's pretty damn cold there. Am I right?"

"You are." Again that cute blush tinged Jamal's cheeks.

When Jamal glanced up over the coffee mug to meet Matt's gaze, Matt found himself all but falling into those eyes. All of Jamal was beautiful—well, all that he could see—but it was his eyes that were like nothing he'd ever seen. Asian in shape, but green, so incredibly green. Matt could spend the rest of his life just gazing into them.

When Jamal raised an eyebrow, Matt realized he was staring. "Shit, man. I'm sorry, it's just..."

"Just what?" There was a tinge of excitement in Jamal's voice, or at least Matt allowed himself to think that for a moment. But there was no way a guy as exotically beautiful as Jamal would see anything in some small town bumpkin like him.

Matt cleared his voice, embarrassed by the words he was about to utter. "It's just... I've never seen eyes like yours before. They're stunning."

"Glad you think so." Now there *was* a definite undertone in that sentence.

"What's up?"

Jamal shrugged his shoulders. "It seems like everyone here only wants some super model. They don't want short, they don't want slender, they *really* don't want Asian." At that he looked completely dejected.

"Well, *they* are off their fucking heads, right? Don't you worry about that, if I say you have stunning eyes, you have stunning eyes." With that, Matt mock-punched Jamal on where he assumed his shoulder to be. It was hard to tell under that thick blanket. Before he could say anything more and thoroughly embarrass himself, Matt stood up. "Let me get that bath on for you."

"You don't have to. You've been so kind already." Jamal went for an attempt at sitting up. If there had been a wrestling contest between man and blanket, the blanket would have won hands down.

"You stay there." Matt pointed to the sofa until Jamal settled back down. "And I'll get a nice hot bath going. You need it, honestly."

Jamal made no protest, so Matt moved into the bathroom. At least the hot water felt good. Matt leaned into the warm steam rising from the water and listened to the sounds of the blizzard outside. If anything, it sounded worse now. He nibbled on his lower lip as, for the hundredth time in the last half an hour, he wondered if he had done the right thing, setting the three of them off in the storm like that. Maybe they would have been better off staying the night in the store. His boss wouldn't have minded, and they would have all been safe. But Ms. Feinstein would have set out anyway; she was just that type. And, no doubt, so would Jamal. He might still be out there, stuck and cold. So maybe this was the right move anyway. And it got Jamal in his apartment. *Oh my god, I am such a perv.*

He really needed to stop thinking this way. It wasn't fair to Jamal, and it wasn't fair to the situation he was in. *Not fair, cut it out. End of story.*

"Hey, bath's ready," he called out the door. When there was no response, he poked his head out the door.

Jamal was again struggling to get to his feet. But between the afghan, the coffee mug and Butch, Matt's overfed Maine Coon cat—who had taken it upon herself to curl up into Jamal's lap while Matt had been running the bath—the boy was having problems, to say the least.

"Oops, hang on." He walked up to the sofa and waved his hands at the cat. "Off you get, Butch. Go find another warm spot."

"Butch?"

"Yeah, 'cause she's anything but. Furball was too obvious." Matt grinned as the cat growled at him before hopping down and stalking off.

Jamal watched her and nodded. "True. Even with her gone I can't seem to get up."

“Here, let me help.” Matt leaned down to take Jamal from under his arms and bodily lift him up. Jamal clutched at the blanket. “Promise on my life, I won’t get all creepy and stare at your underwear.” *Yeah, right.* Matt put his hand over his heart and chose to ignore the voice in his head. *Besides, he already knew what Jamal’s underwear looked like, so there.*

For his part, Jamal snorted and relaxed. “Well, it’s not like you haven’t seen it all, right?”

“Are you calling me a slut?” Matt placed his hand over his chest in mock indignation.

For the first time today, that brought a genuine smile from Jamal. And a laugh that tripped over his tongue and fell about them, a sound so cheerful it could break the gloom of the storm outside. “I would assume the last thing you are is a slut.”

“Oh, how little you know, my friend.”

“Oh?”

That only deserved a coy smile. “Come on, let’s thaw you out.”

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Hours later, a belly happily full of spaghetti and beer, and one purring cat stretched out beside the sleeping form of Jamal, Matt sat by the window and looked out. It had taken seven phone calls, but he had finally found the B&B which had the New York couple, and they were happily bickering up in their room, according to the owner—who sounded like she was pissed off he had suggested they go back to her place. He snorted, well imagining her annoyance. But all was well. They had made a little gamble and it had worked out in the end.

The wind was slowing a bit, enough that he could see across the street, to the mansion which—like this one—had been broken up into several tiny apartments. It was the only way to keep most of the large homes in this town alive. He knew full well if they hadn’t had the famous racetrack in town, most likely this house would have been either abandoned or torn down by now.

A sigh from Jamal brought his attention back. The boy had all but fallen asleep over his dinner plate. Matt had to help him back into the bed. He even tucked him in. All he had to do now was lean back a bit in his chair and he could see Jamal’s face in the light of the lamp. He really was stunning, even with his green eyes closed in sleep. Black hair framing his face, high cheekbones, full lips... what wasn’t there to like?

Or want.

Matt *had* been a good boy when Jamal had gotten undressed for the bath. He could say on his mother's honor he had no idea what Jamal looked like from below the chin or above the knees. His mother would be so proud.

But now he couldn't help the lingering look over the slender boy. And who was off their fucking heads to not snatch him up for their boyfriend? It hadn't occurred to Matt, until Jamal had made the bitter comment about no one wanting the likes of him, that he had never seen Jamal with anyone at the meetings before. People were so odd. He just wished he had known that three years ago. They could have been a couple that length of time, then. Provided Jamal had any feelings for him, that is. He didn't seem to, other than being grateful for not being left to freeze to death in the blizzard.

He told himself he was only going to shut his eyes for a moment. One heavy blink was replaced by another. The last thing he felt was the heaviness of the cat settling in on his lap. At least he thought it was only a moment. But when he looked at the clock, it read six o'clock pm on the nose. They had been asleep for hours. There was a flicker of Jamal's eyelids, and he opened them, looking as confused as Matt felt.

"I think we fell asleep right after lunch," Matt said, hoping that helped him get his bearings. When Jamal looked alarmed at the feeling of heavy cat along his side, Matt added, "it's just Butch. She's a sucker for a warm body to sleep on."

That brought out a smile on Jamal's face. Matt marked this as the second real smile he had seen from the boy. If only he could begin to make this a habit. It would be nice to see Jamal happy, always, instead of pensive, which was the way Matt had usually seen him. But of course, Jamal had much to be serious about, poor guy.

Jamal sat up straight in the bed. "What time is it?"

"Just after six, the storm's letting up. Why?"

"Fuck!" Jamal looked around frantically.

"What's up? What d'you need?"

"A phone. My mother, she would have called earlier, and I wasn't home to answer. And my sister." Jamal knotted his hands up in his hair.

Alarmed, Matt reached out to gently pry his fingers out. "Hey now, what's the big deal? You can use my phone, international rates aren't too exorbitant."

"No, no you don't understand. It's too late to call. My mother's going to think something terrible happened to me. She's going to be so upset." Fear welled up in his eyes.

"What could happen to you in Saratoga? Besides being caught out in a blizzard by some idiot from the coffee shop."

Jamal took a deep breath, holding it for a moment before he let it out with a giggle. An actual, genuine giggle. He rolled his eyes. His body relaxed. "She'll think I've been kidnapped. She *always* thinks I've been kidnapped."

Matt snorted. "And I thought my mom was a bit nuts. What about anyone else in your family? Your sister?"

"Oh, she has more sense. She was over for New Year's last year, so she knows what it's like here. She's seen how it's like... all of it." Jamal's small moment of joy was over. "How *am* I going to be able to go back? It's horrible, being gay there."

"You want to talk about it?" Even though Matt had pulled Jamal's hands from his head, he didn't let go of them.

Jamal looked down at their hands enveloped in one another's. He squeezed Matt's before speaking. "It's just... You're not a human being, a *real* human being." Jamal stared straight ahead as he spoke, not making eye contact with Matt. "All the men in my family, they all think people like you and me, we're better off dead. My papa always says all 'people like that' should be shot. He was annoyed Serik was only beaten up. He said he should have been killed; it would have been better for everyone if he was dead."

"How can you stand it?" Matt slumped down onto the bed and pulled him by the shoulders close to him. If anyone needed a cuddle, it was Jamal.

Jamal laid his head on Matt's shoulder. "I can't. I mean, I have to, but it's hard, so hard... Every day my family calls, telling me about one girl or the other. I'm expected to get married and settle down and have babies as soon as I get back home."

"What do you want?" Matt could feel Jamal tremble a bit by his side, but he didn't pull away.

"Love." Jamal's whisper was so soft Matt barely heard it. But he felt it. "I just feel... like there's something so wrong about me. That no one will ever love me. Back home, I'll have to marry some poor girl who deserves better, who deserves to be loved. But I won't be able to love her. And my life will be

like all the gay men I know, constantly sneaking around, having sex, but no love.”

“So, stay here. There must be a way.”

Rather than answer, Jamal snuggled up against Matt's side. “I always wondered what these houses looked like from the inside.”

Matt looked down to meet his eyes, shivering at seeing *those* eyes, that face so close. All he had to do was lean over a bit to kiss him. “I hope you like it.”

Jamal's gaze flickered from Matt's, to his lips and back up. In a low voice, he said, “I love it. I love your home.”

“So it's not a bad place to be kidnapped then?” Matt's voice was as husky as Jamal's.

The corner of Jamal's mouth twitched as he tried to keep his face serious. “This is true. Should I be worried?”

“Depends.”

“On what?” His face broke into a full smile. He laid back against the pillows and held his hands over his head, like a helpless damsel in distress.

As much as Matt wanted to continue with the teasing, that sight made his body swell in a way that Jamal might not welcome. He tried to straighten up.

“It's okay.”

Jamal's voice was so low Matt almost didn't catch it. He looked up at him. “You can keep coming.” When Matt didn't do anything, Jamal added in a whisper, “Don't make me beg.”

“I'd never make you do that.”

Not quite believing his luck, Matt leaned down until Jamal was close enough to kiss. There was something about seeing those intense green eyes watching him, until he was so close he could feel Jamal's breath on his lips, feel the way the bed was trembling under Jamal's body. His own arms were shaking too, trying to hold him up, trying not to give in to what he wanted.

Jamal didn't make him wait any longer. Wrapping his arms around Matt's shoulders, he pulled Matt to him, pressing their lips together in a kiss Matt had fantasized about for years but never thought would happen. Even now he wasn't sure this wasn't just some sort of mirage. But the lips pressed to his, the hands clutching his back, pulling him tight, were real. As was the soft tongue playing against his lips, asking entry.

He let himself sink into Jamal. It was fighting against instinct not to crush the smaller man under him. Jamal pushed his hips against Matt's, widening his knees to allow Matt to push his cock against Jamal's, only separated by cloth. Matt couldn't stop the long slow thrust against Jamal. His cock filled with blood as needs and wants got in the way of "this is going too fast." To make matters more urgent, Jamal met him, his own hardened erection pressed against Matt's.

That last, mean but sane, part of Matt's brain said they were going too fast, that he wanted more than some one-night stand with Jamal. Though it was the hardest thing to do, Matt pulled away from Jamal, slightly.

"Jamal. Hey, slow down a minute."

It was even worse when Matt saw the stricken look in Jamal's eyes. "Have I...? I'm sorry... I thought..."

Matt reached out and cupped his face. "It's okay, Jamal. You've done nothing wrong. It's just... I want more between us. I like you. I want this to go slow. I'm a bit old-fashioned about that."

Jamal leaned his cheek into Matt's hand. "I am too."

"Oh good." He let out the breath he was holding, and settled down against Jamal again. When Jamal widened his eyes, Matt said, "Well, now that we have that settled, a little kiss and a cuddle, okay?"

Jamal didn't answer him.

At least, not in words.

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## Chapter Five

The smile on Jamal's face lasted forty-three minutes, to the second. This he knew from the clock on Matt's wall, to the blinking face on his own dorm room alarm. Forty-three minutes to feel that all was right with the world.

The outside of Matt's place was as beautiful as the inside. As Jamal had suspected, the house was one of the ones he often walked by and admired, with its combination of red brick walls and blue slate roof, and the curving bay windows to the side of it. It gave him an extra smile now, knowing which bay window was Matt's living room. Now he could walk by and know that Matt was sitting there, watching the world go by.

Most of the snow from yesterday morning was gone, taken away by the winds. It also took away the fairytale look to the town, but at least, the walk was easier. They used the sidewalk this time, as cars were back to driving on the roads. Matt was quiet, but the silence was comfortable. Jamal felt a funny little flutter in his stomach every time he glanced at the taller boy.

Today, they could walk up Caroline Street. The road was narrowed in the final block before it ended on Route 50, and the shops closing in on either side gave the place a secret feel. Matt must have thought so too, as Jamal felt a gloved hand slide into his on the steep walk up the hill. When he glanced over he saw Matt's eyes crinkled in the corners, his smiling mouth hidden under his scarf. Jamal was sure his grin was as silly as Matt's.

Breaking the silence, Matt said, "You have anything planned this week?"

Jamal shook his head, fighting down that funny flutter in his stomach. "Just classes and studying, nothing big."

"Want to go out?" Matt pulled his scarf away from his face. His grin was as silly as Jamal had known it would be. "I mean... if you don't mind... or you want to, that is..."

"I'd love to." Really, like Matt really thought he'd say no? That funny flutter melted away. "Where do you want to go?"

"Dinner Friday? I have to go visit my mom, so I won't be in most of the week, but when I get back I was thinking... If it's okay with you... that we could—y'know—go on a proper dinner date and..."

"I'd love that." Jamal squeezed Matt's hand. He bit his lower lip to keep from breaking out into the goofiest grin known to mankind.

"You okay with *The Wine Bar*? I mean, you being Muslim and all—"

Jamal waved off his concerns. "We're very lax in Kazakhstan about all that, we're not in the grips of Sharia Law or anything like that."

"Oh, good."

"*The Wine Bar* sounds good." His stomach did another funny flop that had nothing to do with being in love. Wasn't that place super expensive? What would his father say to him spending that amount of money? He nodded his head anyway, as this was an actual date, not just some covert groping in a darkened corner.

They parted at the corner of the street, Matt to go to work, Jamal to get to school. He had already missed his first class of the day, but it was only algebra. He would've slept through it anyway. And okay, so *The Wine Bar* was pricy, but it would be worth the memory he could take back home in a year's time. Or... it *would* be in a year's time... had he taken the courses he was supposed to take for his major—the one his father had picked for him in the first place. Jamal had enough to be able to claim a psychology major, but his father wouldn't see the use in that. He walked faster, just thinking about his schooling. What would he say to his father, at the end of this year? His father wasn't a fool, he would learn sooner or later that he had just paid for a psychology major, not the business one he had wanted.

*Oh Papa, why didn't you send Jamilya instead of me, in the first place?* But he knew, there were several reasons. Firstly, he was a boy. Yes, the youngest but still a boy. Second... and this he knew was the real reason, his father wanted him away from all "those type of people." He couldn't admit to what was right before his nose. Jamal barely felt the cold as he walked up the curve of the road to Skidmore College. His thoughts wouldn't let him.

He never saw the grand mansions that lined the road. Nor did he pay it any attention when the houses stopped and the woods started. He even ignored the quaint light posts, that usually made him smile every time he walked by them, as out of time and out of place in his world as the lawn jockeys that also lined the street, showing the racing silks of the owner of each house. This was a world he would never be part of; he was merely a passing outsider. Just like home.

Down the road was the campus, glaringly modern after the grace of the Victorian town. Even so, after three years, it was as close to a home as Jamal could ask for. From the Stadium to Case Green, it was as familiar as all his old haunts, back in Almaty. And here he could be himself. Out, proud, unafraid.

Unafraid mattered the most. If only he hadn't decided to go to his dorm first and change.

As soon as Jamal opened the door, he knew it had been a mistake. The message machine to his phone was blinking. Not once, not twice, not even six or seven. Jamal stood there, numb in the doorway, as he counted over 20 messages. In the corner of the room was his roommate, who gave him a level glare.

"Dude, you're so on your own with it." Denis stood up and took his backpack from the floor. He walked up to Jamal and clapped him on the shoulder. "Good luck with your folks. And... if you need it, there's a few beers in the fridge." Denis winked and left Jamal quite alone with the madly blinking machine.

Great. Rather than listen to what he was sure would be ever-increasingly panicked messages from his mother, Jamal went over to the fridge and pulled out—not a beer—but one of Denis' cans of soda. Not that Jamal was a big fan of them, but he did need the caffeine before facing the barrage of "where were you last night?" that he knew would be coming. A glance at his watch told him it would be six o'clock in Kazakhstan. If he was really unlucky, his mama would call in the next few seconds, before he could think up a convincing story.

Settling into the chair in front of his computer, he reached for his eldest sister's number on the Skype. It only took a few rings before the screen showed Tamilya, her black hair mussed, her new baby on her lap.

When she saw him, her face lit up into a smile before she wagged her free hand at him. "Have you called Mama yet?"

"No, I just got back in. How bad is it?" Already he could feel his stomach twisting around the cold soda he had just unwisely put there.

She just rolled her eyes at him. "Like you need to ask that. You need to call her."

"I'm afraid. She'll kill me."

"No. Papa will kill you. Mama'll just cry and be thankful you're alive."

"Well, what else would I be?" Really, his mother just needed to stop being so paranoid.

Tamilya snorted. "You *know* how she is. If you call her now, you'll just get her, you won't have to worry about Papa. I can take care of him and if Mama's

okay, you know he'll be fine too. So where were you last night? Why *didn't* you call?"

"Well... we had a blizzard here yesterday, and I, sort of, got caught out in it unprepared." Jamal could feel the heat of his blush creep up his neck.

"Unprepared, as in how?"

He screwed up his face. "I, sort of, forgot to put warm clothes on, and my scarf and hat."

"Good one." She snorted and covered her mouth, so he couldn't see her laughter. "You come from a cold country like this, and you get caught out in some tame American storm? Silly boy." Her words held a teasing note, as did her eyes.

"I love you." He stuck his tongue out at her. "Papa was on the line yesterday, telling me all about Aizhana. Apparently she's *not* going to marry Yeleu."

"Well, there's a shock." Tamilya snorted. "Yeleu's such a pig. Good for her, stopping the whole damn mess, she deserves better."

He nodded. Aizhana was a sweet girl, always shy and self-effacing, always with her nose in a book. "She deserves someone who will love her."

"She does." Tamilya had that knowing look in her eye, the one that said without words that she understood. "I wish I could give you a hug. You deserve love, too."

"Trust me, if I could change how I feel, I would have, years ago."

"I know. I don't want you to change, I just want you to be happy."

"One day. Maybe." He picked at the soda can top for a second before deciding to tell her. "Actually, I have a date, this Friday."

"You do? What's he like?" Her entire face lit up. Of his entire family, only his two sisters and one younger cousin knew about him. It was their shared secret.

"You know that guy I told you about a few times. The one that comes to the LGBT meetings but isn't a student there?"

"I thought he had a boyfriend."

"He did, but they broke up a while back. At least that's what Denis says. That they broke up when I was on summer break with you guys."

“Oh.” She looked confused for a moment before waving him on. “So tell me all about it. How did it come about?”

Jamal blushed. “It was the blizzard. He and I were helping this little old lady back to her house. Only I think by the end she was helping us more, certainly me.”

“Really?” She laughed.

Jamal had to snort as well. “Yeah, well, it was cold out. And Papa had just told me about Serik.”

Tamilya sobered at that. “Yeah, Zhaidar was the one who told me.” Zhaidar was their brother.

“I’m sure it was pretty much the same version as Papa’s.”

“Oh no, this being Zhaidar, I’m sure his version was much, much worse. Papa just wants gays all dead. Zhaidar wants to torture and humiliate them before killing.”

“What do you think he’ll do?”

“About you? If you stay in America, nothing. If you stay hidden, nothing. But you don’t need me to tell you what he’d do if he found out, and you live here.” She gave him a sad smile. “Tell you what, I’ll talk to Mama too. You just go grab happiness while you can.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Okay, on that note, I need to lay this chubby boy down. Talk tomorrow, same time?”

He nodded. “Talk later.”

The screen went blank. Sniffing a sigh, Jamal grabbed his books and fled the room before the phone could ring.

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The week went faster than Jamal would have thought possible. As Friday drew closer, he found himself wondering more and more if he had exaggerated Matt’s feelings for him. Maybe he was only being kind. Maybe the reason he had stopped things from going further that night was because he didn’t like Jamal, not because he wanted to go slowly. The tirade he had to hear from Zhaidar, and then from his father again, over Serik, didn’t help. But there was one bright note. Serik was getting better, despite all the hate directed towards

him. According to Jamilya, Jamal's other sister, he would be okay. Beaten, but not dead. Beaten, but still himself.

Throughout the week, Matt did text, and he did call. Friday came quickly enough. Before he knew it, Matt was walking up to him, wonderfully handsome in his woolly sweater and jeans, his brown eyes smiling when they saw Jamal standing just outside, on the tall steps that led to the restaurant. Maybe things would turn out okay after all. Jamal tucked all his nerves into a small ball in his stomach and smiled a greeting to Matt.

"So what d'you think?" Matt asked, stopping before Jamal.

"It looks nice." And expensive. He had already been sweating over the menu that had been placed outside. His father would kill him if he knew how much money he was about to spend.

As if reading his mind, Matt said, "Don't worry, the dinner's on me."

"Wha—? No, that's okay, I can pay."

Matt took him by the hand. "When I said 'let's go on a date' I meant it. This is a date, and as your date, I insist on paying." He led Jamal up the stairs and into the restaurant.

Just this side of terrified, Jamal tried to take his hand back. After all, they were in a public space. What if people objected? But no, no one looked at them. No one said a word. The pretty girl that led them to their table by the window didn't scowl. In fact, she did the opposite; she grinned like the happiest fool on earth. It was only once Jamal was seated that Matt let go of his hand. Jamal could still feel the warmth there, the phantom of Matt's hand in his.

"But I thought you were just a poor artist."

Matt waved that off. "Yeah, well. Even starving artists have a bit of money to spend on a cute boy, eh?"

What could he say to that? Jamal could feel the heat coming off his face at the compliment. No one ever said he was cute. He never heard the word cute associated with his name. He blinked at the man in a mix of pride and disbelief.

Realizing he was starting to stare at Matt, Jamal looked down at the menu. Besides high prices, there were a lot of vegetables on offer, and pork. He cringed at the thought of either one. The pizza was cheap, but it came in either meat free or covered in pork products.

"Any preference on wine?" Matt was smiling when he all but jumped at the question.

“Sorry, it’s just so quiet in here.” He gave Matt a guilty look of apology before glancing about. Besides them, there was another couple at a table along the far wall, and a group of women settling at a table closer to the bar. They were the only ones sitting by the window. Outside was every bit as silent as inside the restaurant.

“It’s the weather,” Matt said, echoing Jamal’s thought. “No one wants to be out when it’s so cold. Life is much easier curled up in a Snuggie, in front of the TV.” He glanced at the menu before asking, “So, the wine? I’m thinking we just get a bottle and split it.”

Jamal looked at the long list that a place calling itself *The Wine Bar* would have. There were countless types of cabernet sauvignon and pinot noir. The whites he dismissed; it was too cold to even think about them. Feeling a rising surge of panic at the prices, he blurted out, “How about you choose? I’m not very good at knowing what I like.”

Matt reached out and stroked Jamal’s fingers where they laid against the menu. “Okay, do you know what you want to eat?”

“I... uh.” He glanced at the one thing that looked good. “Uh... no, not yet? You?” Maybe he could make a choice once he knew the price Matt was spending on his own dinner.

“I was thinking the cod.”

Oh good, that was almost the same amount of money as what he wanted. “Maybe the beef for me.”

Matt snorted and squeezed Jamal’s hand. “I’m not a wine/food snob, are you?”

“No, why?”

“Because we’d never get a wine to match both. So how about a pinot noir? To hell with matching it to fish, it’ll be nice on a cold night.”

“Okay.” Jamal had no idea of how a pinot matched food or not. He was happy to let Matt do all the talking to the waitress.

Why did first dates always have to be so awkward?

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## Chapter Six

The cold air felt good in Matt's lungs, as he breathed in deeply. After the stifling atmosphere of the restaurant, and Jamal's shyness, it was cleansing to be out in the night. Maybe going to such a fancy place had been a mistake. Jamal had clearly been uncomfortable. Though Matt wasn't sure if it was because they were obviously on a date in a public place, or if the prices at the restaurant made him uncomfortable. Matt felt bad. Nervously, he fingered the condom package tucked safely in the pocket of his coat. Just at the last minute he had remembered that he was out—a date really had been *that* long ago—and had run to the gas station to grab a pack. Figuring it would make Jamal uncomfortable if they had to go together to get some. After seeing the shy way Jamal had acted when confronted with a menu, he had probably guessed right.

Matt glanced at the boy, who was looking up the street. "Do you want to come back for a drink? Or would you rather go back to your dorm? I'll walk you back, if you do." Yes, the walk would feel good, tonight.

"I-I can come back for a drink... if that's okay." Jamal looked so unsure of himself. It was all Matt could do not to scoop him up right then and there. There was just enough of a size difference that he could do it without looking the fool.

Reaching out, he took Jamal by the hand. "That sounds perfect."

Jamal's hand was just that little bit smaller than his, just enough to make it a perfect fit. They set off down the empty street, the only sounds their boots on the snow. Through both their gloves, he could just feel a small tremble coming from Jamal. He was so nervous. Matt gave his hand a squeeze for reassurance.

"You don't have to come back if you're not ready."

"No, I-I want to."

"You sure?"

Jamal nodded. "Lead the way."

"Okay." They slipped down the dark alley that led to Matt's house. That was one advantage of living in town, everything was within walking distance.

In the darkest shadow in the alley, Matt stopped. Before Jamal could ask him why, he pulled the smaller boy to him, so close he could feel the heat of



Jamal's breath on his face. So close all it took was for Matt to tilt his head slightly, and Jamal's lips were pressed against his own.

When the kiss broke, he murmured, "I've been thinking about that all week."

"And?" Jamal smiled up at him, his eyes dancing.

"It's every bit as good as I remembered."

"You *could* have more." Jamal's smile was teasing.

"Now that's the best offer I've heard all week."

The next kiss was rougher, more urgent. Without saying a word, Jamal took him by the hand and led him back into the light of the library parking lot, and beyond that, up the street to his home. The light from his living room, spilling out of the bay window and onto the snow had never looked so inviting. Matt would have run—if running wouldn't have looked just a bit overeager. But he couldn't wait to get Jamal inside, to get him naked and into his bed.

Shutting the door, Matt turned his full attention to Jamal. Like he had any choice. Jamal was fully pressed against him as soon as he took his coat off. Jamal's lips were pressed against his own, Jamal's tongue was against his lips, gently, as though even that part of him was shy. But not his hands. They were pulling Matt's shirt up, daring to press firmly against his skin, as if Jamal was starved for the feel of naked flesh.

The bedroom was just beyond. It took all of Matt's will not to push Jamal into it. He yanked Jamal's hoodie, then his T-shirt off. Jamal's skin was like silk under his fingers and under his tongue, as he kissed and sucked on his chest, trailing down until he caught one small nipple with his tongue. Jamal's nipples were so small, so dark. Matt was careful—just—to kiss and suck them, not to bite too hard. He felt, more than heard, Jamal moan.

Jamal's chest was more muscular than he had thought it would be. It had been hard to tell, since the boy wore baggy clothes all the time. In the faint light of his living room lamp coming through the bedroom door, Matt could see what he had been waiting years for.

Jamal was beautiful.

Matt only took a moment to admire him before he fell upon Jamal's body, kissing and caressing, feeling the way his muscles knotted and tensed under that silken skin. It was nothing to pull at his jeans, to tug at them until they fell

away, giving Matt exactly what he wanted. He breathed in the scent of maleness and need. Then enveloped Jamal's cock in his mouth, tasting him, feeling him fill his mouth. Matt could feel his own cock straining against boxers and jeans, pleading to be freed.

Pushing Jamal onto the bed, he stood and complied. Jamal propped himself onto his elbows and watched him, a half smile playing on his lips. When Matt's jeans dropped, Jamal sat up and—never taking his eyes off of Matt's—took Matt's cock in hand, and then into his mouth. The warmth alone was almost enough to make Matt come. This moment was everything he had dreamed it would be. Jamal swirled his tongue around the head of Matt's cock before taking him deep, so deep he could feel the ridges of his throat.

"You keep doing that, I'm gonna come," he murmured, gripping Jamal's hair in his fists.

Instead of answering, Jamal leaned back, letting Matt's cock leave his mouth. He lay back until only his feet were still on the ground, Matt between his knees. It would be so easy to sink to the bed, to sink into Jamal. Matt wanted to fill him, to make Jamal his. He leaned down briefly to grab for a condom in his jean's pocket before he realized something.

"Shit, wait a minute, I forgot, the condoms are still in my coat." And probably still cold. Matt gulped at that thought.

Jamal reached to stop him. "Come on, it's okay." Enticingly, he urged Matt's hips to press against his own.

It would be easy, so easy. Just fall into that warm, sticky heat between them. To press his aching cock to Jamal's ass, to spread him open, to feel his cock sliding inside. Into that warmth. Jamal had to be so tight, Matt almost lost it just thinking about how good he was going to feel. It would be so easy, so very easy.

With a groan, he said, "No, man, I'm not gonna be disrespectful to you like that. Protection, always."

Jamal looked disappointed as he turned away from the bed and walked as fast as he could and still maintain his dignity. The coats were where he had left them, thrown over the sofa. Quickly he fumbled around with the pockets, until the small packet fell out of the—of course—very last pocket. They were as cold as he had feared. He ripped a few out and held them between his palms, trying to warm them before he had to slip one on in a few seconds.

"They're still cold," he said by way of explanation to that beautiful boy laying naked on his bed. Only instead of the overcome with lust look he had had only seconds ago, now Jamal looked worried. Stressed even. "It'll only take a few moments, it'll be okay." When Jamal didn't answer him, Matt asked, "Are you okay?"

Jamal sat up, nervously biting his lower lip. "I uh... do those things hurt? I heard they hurt really bad."

"No, no, you're fine. I'll be gentle and..." Wait a minute. What was Jamal saying? He'd "heard" that they hurt? Feeling the mood slip away, Matt asked the one question he didn't want to ask. "So... have you never used one of these?"

Instead of answering right away, Jamal looked horribly guilty. Guilty enough to pull the sheet over his waist, hiding his erection from sight. "I... well, we don't really... I mean, in my country... you know how it is if you're gay there..."

"What, they hate gays so much you can't even find a condom? Not one?"

"No, if you ask for one—or for a test—then you'll be found out. And then what happens?"

"Wait a minute... you've never been tested? You've been having loads of unprotected sex and you've never been tested?" Tossing the condoms down, Matt reached for his jeans. They weren't having sex now, no way.

Still keeping the sheet over his lap, Jamal brought his legs over the side of the bed, looking like he just wanted to hide under that sheet. "I think I should go."

"I think you should too."

He couldn't look at Jamal as the boy stood up and gathered his clothes as quickly as he could. What more was there to say? If he hadn't forgotten the condoms would Jamal have even told him, or would he have just let it happen? Matt slumped to the spot on the bed that Jamal had vacated. He didn't say a word as the boy slipped out of the bedroom. When the door shut, he punched the pillow beside him.

In the window Butch jumped, the noise too loud for her. "Sorry, cat," he muttered, not sure if he was angry or sad. Sad certainly. He had just let something he thought was going to be so good—someone he had wanted for so long now—slip away. Or rather, he had found out something he had wanted for

so long wasn't what he had really wanted. The last thing he needed in his life was some foolish guy who thought AIDS was nothing.

What the fuck? What was wrong with Jamal? *Why* was he so stupid? Surely it couldn't be that hard to find condoms over there, could it? What did straight couples do?

Why did life have to be so messy?

"Butch, you're lucky you're spayed." The cat stared at him like she was unimpressed. And why would she be? He snorted at his own thoughts and looked down, to the chair that Jamal had thrown his clothes over. It should have been empty, but no, there was the hoodie on it. *Shit, did he just leave his clothes here and walk back in the cold?* Oh, and hadn't *he* told Jamal he would walk him back? Y'know, do the gentlemanly thing and see he was in safe, particularly after almost getting frostbite.

Fuck.

Matt scrambled to get dressed and get his boots on as quickly as he could.

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## Chapter Seven

The night was bitter but Jamal didn't feel a bit of it. He was lost, so far inside his own thoughts that he felt nothing, and saw even less. As fast as he could, he walked down the empty street, glad that no one was around to see the shame that must have been written all over his face. Things were so different here, too different. He was almost to the street lights of the main street when he heard the sound of someone running behind him.

Before he could turn, he heard Matt's voice. "Hang on, wait a sec."

Jamal stopped but didn't turn around. This was the last thing he could deal with. "What? Haven't you already hurt me enough for one night?" He didn't bother to hide the pain in his voice. What was the point? Matt had rejected him, why be coy about if it hurt or not?

Matt caught up to him. "Hey, look at who's hurting who. When were you going to tell me you've had unprotected sex and no AIDS test, eh?"

"I wasn't trying to hurt you, I..." I what? He *knew* this day might come, he just never knew it would come with the angry almost-lover being Matt.

Matt, who he had daydreamed about for three years. Matt, who was funny at the meetings. Matt, who knew exactly what kind of drink he liked and exactly how to make it. Matt, who had cared enough that he had saved him in the blizzard. Matt, who had talked to him about Serik. Matt, who was everything he wanted.

Matt.

Looking down, Jamal whispered, "I-I was going to tell you."

"In those next few seconds I hope."

"I was going to tell you, can you just leave me alone?" His voice broke at that, a sob caught in his throat.

In a voice that sounded as ragged as Jamal felt, Matt said, "You left this." He held up the hoodie. "I don't want you to get cold."

"I'm from a cold country, Matt. This is nothing." Jamal eyed the hoodie like the traitor it was.

Matt gave him a sardonic look. "So why did you get so cold the other day? A blizzard shouldn't have been anything for you, then."

"No, it shouldn't have. I was stupid. I left the room without getting dressed. I was thinking about my friend." God, what a long week this was turning out to be. Jamal half-kicked at the ground, wishing it would just open up and take him away. If crying could get him somewhere, Jamal would have tried it. He felt like trying it. Instead, he hunched up and half-turned from Matt. Why stay and be humiliated more? Matt didn't want him.

Before he had a chance to walk away, Matt cleared his throat. "I said I'd walk you home and get you there safe, so if it's all the same to you, that's what I'm doing."

Jamal stopped and looked over his shoulder to Matt. "I live in a country where most men think all gay men should be shot and killed. Do you really think a walk through some quaint little Americana town is going to either frighten me, or honestly be dangerous?"

"So is that why?"

"Why what?"

Matt winced at Jamal's sharp tone but continued anyway. "Why you didn't get an AIDS test."

"I would have thought that was obvious. Don't you get it, Matt?" Jamal stared at him like he had gone mad. "We can't tell *anyone* in my country. We can't meet one another, we can't go out on dates, we can't fall in love. Now you tell me how I'm supposed to go and 'do the right thing' when I've got a mother who hounds me all day and night—even here in America—to go find some pretty girl and get married. You know she calls me every day—*every day*—to talk about this girl or that girl or 'Did you hear, Zhuldyz doesn't have a boyfriend. Why don't you be her boyfriend?' Matt, I get this *all the time*. I get it from my mama and my papa, I get it from my brother and from my two male cousins *every day*. And on top of that, when I'm home, I have to worry about being found out *every day*. I have to watch what I say and what I do. I have to watch where I go and is anyone following me? It's frightening, and in that atmosphere are you honestly asking me if I can just run down to my doctor's office and say 'Oh, can I get an AIDS test?' Do you *really* think I can?"

Jamal could see Matt's body deflate right then and there. In a small voice, he said, "Well, why didn't you tell me all this?"

"What the fuck?" Jamal all but shouted, crossing his arms. "I *have* told you about how it is in my country. Have you forgotten already about what happened

to my friend? That was just for walking home. What do you honestly think would happen if I did something as dangerous as try to get a condom?"

Even in the moonlight it was easy to see just how embarrassed Matt was. "Okay, but why didn't you get tested here? You've been here three years now, no one back home would have known."

Jamal rolled his eyes at Matt's ignorance. "What was the point? Haven't you been listening to me? Who's been looking at me? Nobody wants me, no one wants the freaky Asian dude with the weird eyes who can't even speak English without an accent. And I'm Muslim on top of that... Who knows, I may want to blow something up, y'know, just snap and there I am, off on *Jihad*." Jamal waved his arm over his head. "Trust me, *no one* wants me."

"Well... *I* want you."

Jamal stared at Matt. After all this, did he actually say what he thought he just said? "You really *still* want me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

That word hung in the air like a knife, like a hurt. Jamal couldn't help that his voice was so soft, so alone in that one word. Why, indeed? Matt reached under Jamal's chin and lifted his face up until their eyes met. In the light of the moon, he could see tears forming into ice on Matt's eyelashes. Before he could say another word, Matt wrapped his arms around Jamal and kissed him. Jamal let his head fall back, let Matt enter the heat of his mouth.

When the kiss broke off, Matt looked into Jamal's eyes. In a voice rough with the effort not to cry, he said, "You're not getting it either. I don't give a fuck about what other people think. I want you. I want to be with you, now can we get that cleared up? I don't ask many guys out on dates, and I, certainly, don't have crushes that go on for three years."

"Okay." In that moment, Jamal decided. Love was more important than shame, than fear. If he wanted this life, he had to grab it. And he had to make amends, starting right here. "Okay... I'll do it. I'll get the test." His heart pounded just thinking about the test, and his family finding out about it. His voice left him with his courage as he asked, "But it won't be on my record or my visa information or anything like that, will it?"

"No Jamal. Wait... are you worried your folks'll find out?" Matt looked surprised, like it had never occurred to him. Jamal nodded miserably. Matt

squeezed his shoulders and looked him deep in the eye. "Ah, Jamal, no one has a right to know, no one. It'll be okay, they can't hurt you here."

Jamal stiffened at that and pulled away from Matt. He really didn't get his family, did he? Over his shoulder he said, "They wouldn't hurt me anyways."

"Maybe not physically, but you're already hurt inside. How could you not be?" Matt gently pulled Jamal around to face him.

Jamal knew he was right, but family *was* family. It didn't matter that Papa wanted all gay men dead, he was still family and even if he found out, he never would throw him away like he had seen so many other boys in the LGBT group talk about with their families. He might never speak to him again, but he never would cut him completely out of the family. "All I have is my family."

"Yeah, but they try and control everything you do. What kind of family is that?"

Jamal looked up the dark street before answering. "You don't understand, that's just how it is in Kazakhstan. They can't help it. Gays just don't exist there."

"Bullshit. You're there, you exist."

"No, stupid." Jamal rolled his eyes for both of them. "Gays don't exist to *them*, not literally. They're not a part of Kazakh culture."

"Yeah, family... I suppose I'm not one to talk about families." Matt sighed heavily. He looked every bit as tired and down as Jamal felt. "I'm sorry, Jamal. I-I hear what you're saying, but I guess I don't really understand what it means." Even his voice was low. "I mean... I *know* bad shit happens to gay men all around the world, but... I suppose I was happy in my own little bubble of openness, and it never really dawned on me what it felt like, or what you have to go through so you're not found out and hurt. I never really got it until now."

Jamal shrugged his shoulders, a sad smile on his lips. "Welcome to my world."

"Yeah, really." Matt looked away, his eyes wandering from the lamp posts, to the cars, to the space just before Jamal's feet. Even in the faint light, Jamal could see his lower lip tremble, as though he were about to cry. In a voice so soft Jamal had to lean forward to hear it, Matt asked, "Can I see you again?"

Jamal stepped forward until he was against Matt's chest. "Of course." It was no effort to kiss him, Matt all but melted into that contact. When it broke, Jamal



murmured into his chest, “Only... after the test. I want to be alone for it. Is that okay?”

“Anything you want, Jamal, just please...”

“Yes?”

“Please be okay. I just want you happy.” Matt leaned his head down, until their foreheads were touching. “Can I still walk you home?”

Jamal reached up and softly stroked the side of Matt’s cheek, feeling the stubble under his fingers. “As long as you hold my hand.”

“I can do that.” Matt kissed his fingers before taking Jamal’s hand in his.

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## Chapter Eight

“So honey, what are you meditating over that takes up all your concentration?”

Matt looked up from the spot he had been staring at for the past half an hour, it seemed. Ms. Feinstein had somehow managed to sneak in when he wasn't looking. *No stupid, you were too busy staring at that hole and being upset about Jamal.*

As if she could read his mind, Ms. Feinstein asked, “What's wrong, honey? You okay?”

He started to nod yes... but the nod came out as a shake. Behind his eyes he could feel the burn of tears wanting to come out. But no, he wasn't going to cry.

“Come on. Pour me a coffee, and come sit down with me.” She patted his hand and walked to her customary seat by the window.

On automatic, Matt poured two coffees and walked to Ms. Feinstein's seat. The only time this table wasn't considered hers was in the summer, when she took up residence at the table on the right side of the shop's outdoor seating.

Today couldn't be more different than the summer. Besides him and Ms. Feinstein, there was no one else in the shop. Hell, Matt hadn't even seen many people walking down Main Street all day, and they had done so little business he wasn't really sure why they bothered opening on days like this. Ms. Feinstein smiled at him as he walked towards her. She finished taking off her winter gear as he placed the coffee before her, black just the way she liked it.

“You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, my dear. What's wrong?”

“It's Jamal.” He felt guilty talking, but he needed to get it out to someone.

She looked up from her coffee. “Is that the boy from the other day?”

He nodded. “He's from Kazakhstan.”

“Ah, he is quite exotic looking.”

He felt terrible saying the next words but he couldn't stop them. “His family is strange.”

Ms. Feinstein snorted and eyed him as she put her drink back on the table. Patting his hand, she said, "Now, Matt, just because they're not like us, that doesn't make them strange. That's just how diversity works. And your mother's no walk in the park, either."

Matt tried hard not to pull a face. "No. I mean, I know that. But no, this family is *strange*."

"Okay. How so?" She looked him straight in the eye.

Running his fingers through his hair, Matt decided to start with the biggest issue. "Well first off, they're like super homophobic."

Ms. Feinstein patted him on the hand again and sighed. "That's sadly the norm, Matt. We're just lucky we live in a liberal place like New York. A homophobic family wouldn't be out of place in, say, Alabama, or even parts of New Jersey. That's just how the world is."

"No, they're like super homophobic. His dad tells him all the time that gay people need to be killed." Matt felt like punching someone—like Jamal's dad—when he said that. "How the hell can someone be that evil?"

"I take it they don't know he's gay?"

He snorted. "How could they not? I mean, I like Jamal—I mean I *like* Jamal—but even so, he's pretty obvious, don't you think?"

"It doesn't matter what you think, or what I think." Now was her turn to snort and roll her eyes. "Remember, you *are* gay, and I'm an old liberal Jew, so of course we're going to see gayness where it occurs. But, if it's not something you're around much, how can you spot it?"

"True." He really hated when she was right.

"Just look at what's happening in Russia. You have city officials claiming they have no gay people, even when there's gay bars in their town. Look at that idiot who ran Iran, Ahmadinejad. He claimed there were no gay men in Iran. Look at the holocaust deniers. If they can pretend that eleven million people didn't disappear off the face of the planet, then what's a family who doesn't want to see that their son is gay?"

Matt glowered at her. "Are you always right?"

She had the audacity to look smug. "Yes, and the sooner you realize it, the easier your life will be. Now what does Jamal think of his family?"

“Well, that’s the oddest thing. I’m pretty sure he loves them. He was so worried his parents would be upset that he spent the night at my place, and he’s resigned to going back to Kazakhstan and doing what they want when he gets his degree.”

“And what do they want?” She worded her phrase in a neutral voice.

“Oh, the usual. Go find some nice girl, get married, settle down, make them grandkids.”

“And what does Jamal want?”

Matt couldn’t stop his fingers from reaching up and touching his hair once again. “I think he wants to stay here. But I’m not sure. I’m not sure he really knows. I’d say his heart wants his family, but his head wants to be himself.”

“And what do you want?”

“I just want him happy.”

“And?”

His heart was beating so hard he was surprised she couldn’t hear it. “And I want him. I want to be his boyfriend.”

She smiled and patted his hand. “So why aren’t you then? Does he feel the same back?”

“I-I think so.” How he could though, after the way Matt had treated him the other night, was beyond Matt.

She sat back and studied her coffee. “So just enjoy being with him. What’s the problem?”

“I guess I just don’t get his family. Why does he put up with it?” That was the biggie. Were it Matt, he would just tell the bunch of them where to go. He might even give them a map to get them there as well.

Ms. Feinstein’s voice cut into the fantasy that was beginning to form in his head, of what he’d like to do with families like Jamal’s. “Yes, but honey, it’s not your place to understand his family. If you care for him, then your place is to support him.”

Didn’t he know it. Matt sighed, knowing she was right on every count.

“The rest will come along, or it won’t. But, please Matt...”

“Yes?” His voice sounded like a petulant child not getting what he wanted. He hated when he sounded that way.

"Please don't pressure him about either being gay or about his family. I'm sure he's got enough crap on his shoulders as it is. If you care for him, then just support him as much as you can. The other stuff will work itself out, or it won't. But there's nothing you can do, and if you try, you'll just lose him. Got it?" She fixed him with a stern look.

"Got it. Anything else?"

"Yes, wear something not gray for a change. And shave, would you?"

He laughed and rubbed his stubble. "Don't like my beard then?"

"No."

"Okay, I'll shave."

"Today. Get yourself a shave, and go take that poor boy out to the movies or something."

"Okay, okay! I'll do it."

Ms. Feinstein snuggled back into her oversized coat, a sly smile on her face. "Good, now don't fuck it up."

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Matt stood before the wide windows and teal-colored slatted-front of the local crêpe cafe, his heart pounding. This was it, the big reveal. Jamal had left a text on his phone only an hour after his talk with Ms. Feinstein, saying he had gotten the results. Matt should have stayed at work, but he was too terrified. No way could he stay there and stew until five, when he was supposed to be off. No, some things you couldn't wait for, and this was one of them. He had all but run to where Jamal had said to meet him.

Jamal was where he said he'd be. Even through the window Matt could make out his intense green eyes. The boy was sitting at the long table that faced out onto the street. Matt's heart threatened to pound its way out of his chest as he nodded to Jamal and walked to the door. Steel and glass was never so hard to open, as in that moment. *What would Jamal say? Would it be okay? Would Jamal still want him? Why had he reacted the way he had done, the other night? Yeah, the walk back had been sweet, after the fight. But they hadn't spoken since that night. What if Jamal had thought it over, and decided he didn't want Matt?*

*What if the test was positive?* Just the thought made Matt's chest tight.

The balmy warmth of the cafe enveloped him as he walked through the door. Jamal was to his right, but the boy wasn't looking at him, choosing instead to keep his gaze towards the window. Gritting his teeth, Matt walked to the long wooden counter that nestled under the wrought iron window that stretched across the entire front of the building. No doubt in the past this had once been a warehouse. It had that sort of look.

Jamal looked tense, even from the side. There was a rigid way that he held himself, and the way his head stayed resolutely forward that told Matt he was as nervous as he himself felt. *Well, here goes nothing, just the rest of my life.*

"Hey." Not the most innovative opening, but really, what did you say in a situation like this? Matt patted Jamal on the shoulder before sitting down at the empty bench next to him. It was the first tiny victory that Jamal didn't flinch or pull away when he did that.

Jamal smiled at him, but it was a weak, nervous smile. "Hey," was all he said back. Even that word sounded like it was hard to get out of his mouth.

Well, one of them needed to talk. Reaching out, Matt grasped Jamal's hand. "Hey man, I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

Jamal snorted and gripped Matt's hand. "No, it should be me apologizing. I'm sorry I fucked it all up. I just never thought anyone would ever want to be with me, it's just, y'know..." He was blinking rapidly.

Feeling even more like shit now, Matt brought his other hand up so he could cover Jamal's in both of his. "Well for starters, as I said the other night, *I want you to be with me. I've wanted you for going on three years now.*"

Jamal looked him in the eyes. "Why didn't you tell me before the other day? I just thought no one really liked me very much, that I was too ugly for anyone." His words were so low Matt had to lean in to hear him.

Matt's voice was just as soft. "Are you out of your mind? Jamal, have you looked in a mirror lately? You're stunning, you're a fucking ten out of ten. Oh my god, just look at you, really *look* at you. Look at your eyes, look at your lips, your face, your body. *Look* at you."

Jamal pulled a face. "*I have* looked at me. I'm nothing special."

"Well, maybe not back home—in which case your country must be the best looking country on earth—but to me, where I sit, you're perfect. Like I said, I've been attracted to you ever since you first moved over here." Jamal looked like he didn't know what to say at that. Taking the initiative—hell, he had

nothing to lose at this point—Matt held tightly onto Jamal's hand. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was such an insensitive asshole the other night. I'm sorry if I've upset you. You can hate me. You can say you never want to see me ever again, but Jamal, I want you. I want to be with you. I want to protect you when your dad is being harsh to you. I want to go to bed with you, and I want to wake up next to you. I want to make you breakfast. I want to go on long walks with you. I want to take you to the races this summer. I want you. I want to show you off to my friends and take you home to Mom and Dad. I want you to laugh. I want you to cuddle with me at night in front of the TV. Do you get this? I like you. I *really* like you. And yeah, I know it's only been a short while, but I want to be with you. I don't need any more time to get used to that idea. I already know it."

"Oh."

Jamal looked stunned by that barrage. Hell, Matt couldn't blame him. He'd have been stunned into silence too, had it been him hearing it. Maybe he'd said too much. Maybe it was only a couple weeks and one disaster of a date, but there it was. He couldn't lie. Jamal would just have to take it or leave it. The long pause before Jamal opened his mouth to speak seemed to be eons. People could have been born, grown up, had kids, and died in that space. Matt could feel his heart jackhammering. Hell, Matt could *hear* his heart jackhammering. He half expected to look down to see it spring out, Alien-esque, onto the table.

"Did you mean all that?" Jamal turned his hand over and placed his fingers between Matt's. And he smiled. It was like the sun had come out, his smile.

"I did."

"Oh." He bit his lower lip to keep from stopping his smile from getting even bigger. "I like you too... I mean I feel the same way, everything you said. Except the family bit, well, maybe my sister. If I took you to Kazakhstan, then we'd just get ignored. Or something."

"That's okay. I'd love to meet your sister."

"My sisters. There's two of them."

"Then I'd love to meet your sisters. All two of them."

"The doctor..."

"Yes?" His heart really was going to fall out of his chest, fall out and pump frantically all over the table.

"I'm okay."

"I... uh... what? You're clear? You're fine?"

"Yeah, all clear."

"Oh. Thank. Fuck." Matt didn't care who was watching at this point; he took Jamal by the shoulders and planted a kiss right on his mouth. Jamal stiffened momentarily under his fingers, then relaxed into the kiss. When it broke, Matt grinned and held up a finger. With his other hand, he dug around in his coat pocket until he found what he was looking for. Slapping it down onto the table, he said, "There."

"You got tested too?" Jamal held a hand up to smother his laugh as he picked the paper up with his other hand. He looked at it, Matt watched his eyes scan the document until he got where he wanted to go. "Negative too?"

"Yep."

"So what are we waiting for?"

Matt grinned. "Indeed, why're we still here?" He stood up and offered his hand to Jamal. When the boy placed his in Matt's, Matt said, "Lead the way, you know where you're going."

"I do now."

"Good. So do I."

**The End**



## Author Bio

*Arielle Pierce currently resides in both southern Spain and in Wales, ensuring that she doesn't miss the worst of the rains and gales of one country, nor the blazing heat and droughts of the other. When not merrily scribbling away about the adventures of two men in love (or lust, more likely) she can be found sewing sock kitty cats for her small son or gardening in her back yard, where she is locked into a losing battle with the weeds (and with the sock cats, for that matter).*

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