

ONE

Brooke Mathews turned the key of her apartment door and walked in. The room was exactly as she had left it, but it felt as if something was missing—or rather someone. Everywhere she looked, she could see him, feel him, recall his jokes, his smiles, his laugh, his scent—the list was never ending. His presence was everywhere.

She walked to her bedroom and sat on her bed, drained of all energy. She had just returned from a fourteen-hour non-stop flight from Dubai where her technology solutions firm, Simons, had opened their Middle Eastern headquarters. As the group head of human resources, she had travelled from the US head office in New York to Dubai for the occasion. The trip had been a huge success; she had already appointed an HR manager to the new office and found two other promising candidates to run the department. To top it all off, the weather had been perfect. She had ample time to do some sightseeing and shopping. The only real dampener had been the worrying absence of calls from her fiancé.

Her fiancé...the thought brought back memories of the man who held her heart. Harris Amin was thirty-two, but had the demeanor of a much younger man. He was a Muslim and even though that alone could have been a strain on their relationship, it wasn't. He was the most decent man she had ever come across and a looker too. He had dark brown, flip-flop hair, warm chocolate brown eyes and a mega-watt smile that showed his perfect teeth. He was always stylishly dressed and carried himself well. He wasn't very tall, just two inches taller than her.

Brooke was five foot six, a brunette with light-colored eyes, a generous mouth and a dimpled smile. Her complexion was slightly tanned because of the Dubai trip. She wasn't exactly beautiful but according to Harris, she was his Snow White.

She searched in her handbag for her phone and dialed his number again, but all she got was a disconnected tone, just like every single time she had tried calling earlier.

Where are you, Harris? Why is your phone disconnected? She wondered for the umpteenth time. She hadn't heard from him in almost three weeks.

Taking a hot bath might ease her tension she thought, but as she collected her clothes from the closet she decided to take a quick shower instead and go straight over to his apartment to find out for herself.

After getting ready, Brooke hailed a cab and was on her way to her fiancé's place. The first time they met was in New York City at a breakfast place called 'Tuck In' on Lexington and Second Avenue. She had already spotted him several times before that, here and there. The first time, he had been bargaining at a flower shop, the next time he was watching a violinist perform on the street corner, and the third and final encounter before they started talking, was when they had both hailed the same cab. Like a typical New Yorker she had been ready for a fight, but he had been gracious about letting her have it. Normally she wouldn't have remembered these encounters with a stranger, but the noteworthy thing about him was that he somehow always seemed to stand out in a crowd.

At the flower shop for example, the reason she remembered him was because he was buying five dozen white roses. Who does that, she had thought to herself. No one! And as for the street performance, nobody had been watching the old man as he played his violin, but Mr. Odd One Out had not only been watching, he had been listening with great interest and had a joyous smile on his face. No one seemed to have the time to listen to Mr. Old is Gold, but somehow Mr. O³ had the time to listen, applaud and drop a handful of coins into the grateful man's upturned case. And in their cab encounter, she remembered how he had been so nice about the whole thing, despite her militant attitude.

So naturally, when they actually met by fluke at the breakfast place and talked, she wasn't bothered by the strangeness. In fact, she felt quite guilty about the whole cab episode. Truth be told, once she saw he was a regular there, she actually made an effort to go to the same restaurant because he was such a pleasing sight to see so early in the morning; of course the yummy pancakes and waffles mattered too. But even then she knew those were just secondary reasons for her. She felt drawn to this strange man from the first time she saw him, but back then she had no way of knowing that in the next three months she would fall so completely for him and would agree to marry him.

As Brooke rode the cab she wondered once again why there was such complete silence from Harris. *Is he angry with me? That can't be because*

everything was fine when I left. In any case, he would have brought it up. She spent the ride to his place thinking about possible reasons for his silence and how wonderful it would be to reconnect after a month apart.

However, she was not prepared for what lay ahead of her.

It took nearly three minutes of constant bell ringing before Harris' landlord Sandy finally opened his door and poked his head out.

"You looking for Harris?" he asked and without pausing for a second, he continued in the same monotone, "He left. Wait a minute and I'll bring out the letter he left for you."

Brooke's mind was still trying to process what he told her when Sandy returned, handed over an envelope to her and shut the door. Stunned, Brooke held the thin envelope and slowly ripped it open. Inside she found a piece of paper that said, "I am leaving for Pakistan and I won't be coming back. Forgive me."

A tiny bomb went off inside her stomach; her breath was trapped in a space between her lungs and throat. She blinked hard and re-read the note several times. The sentence was simply written yet the weight of the words made the piece of paper suddenly feel very heavy in her hands. She stood rooted to the spot, mouth agape, feet frozen, and a single tear rolled down her cheek. She closed her eyes and fell back against the wall, trying desperately to breathe through the tears that were now streaming down her face. She couldn't bring herself to believe that he was gone. This had to be some sort of a prank. Somewhere deep down she knew it wasn't. She stared at the door, wondering if this was a bad dream but the paper in her hand indicated it was indeed real and so was this moment.

Fifteen minutes later, she was back in a cab. She didn't know how she did it. She felt numb. Harris was gone! How could he be gone? Why would he go? When did he leave? How long had he been gone? Sandy must know more. In an instant she was out of the cab again, the driver cursing behind her, and climbing the steps to Sandy's door.

"Now what?" Sandy bellowed when he saw her.

"I need to know more, like when he left? Why he left, whom he left with...?"

She wanted to add more but Sandy cut her short and said, "Listen now, he didn't tell me much, he called, and he called and he called. That's all he did. I know nothing—didn't he explain in that letter of his?"

pointing to the piece of paper she was clutching so tightly her fingers turned red.

“Umm no. It says I’m leaving for my hometown and sorry,” she muttered quietly.

“Ouch! That’s harsh. You wanna come in for a drink?”

She felt touched, “No thanks Sandy, just tell me everything you can recall about the interactions you’ve had with him. Maybe I’ll be able to make some sense out of it all,” she pleaded.

“Like I said before B, he just called. Okay, I got like...six calls maybe in total. He told me I could rent out his place again if I wanted to because he was clearing out. He also said that movers would be dropping by and I should, like, guide them as to what belongs to him and what belongs to me. That’s it. Oh, and he mailed me a check along with that letter addressed to you,” he pointed to the envelope still held tightly in her hand.

“So wait...you got about six calls? He didn’t come in person? And that’s all he had to say on the phone? What am I missing here? How is that possible, there must be more, there *has* to be more. Please tell me there is more, because this is not like him, to just disappear and leave a note. I’ve known him for three months now! I am his fiancée. I need to know more...please think,” she pleaded.

Scratching his chin, he offered little more. “Nope that’s all, but you should know that these calls came like a century back.”

“A century?”

“Yeah, I mean this month was just beginning...” he trailed off.

“You mean to say that he made all those calls in the first week of November?”

“Yep.”

“Are you absolutely sure he did not stop by?”

“Positive. He said to mail him the papers in his desk because he couldn’t come over.”

“And you’re telling me this now? What’s wrong with you Sandy, I thought I told you I wanted to know every detail!”

“Yeah, sorry B, it just occurred to me.”

“Will you please give me the address?” she asked quietly.

“Umm...yeah...so about that...you know that I’m a careless person and all right, well I...” he started to stall.

“Where is the address, please tell me you didn’t throw that piece of info away?”

“Sorry B, threw it away in the trash ages ago.”

Brooke closed her eyes; of course he threw it away. She couldn’t expect Sandy to keep his trash for three weeks. He was sloppy, but not that disgusting.

“Do you remember any part of that address?”

“No, I don’t. Wait, actually yes, I do! And you know what B, think of it as your early Christmas present from me...one word in that address resembled the word *scratchy*.”

“Scratchy? Really, that is my early Christmas present?”

“Hey it was a weird name. Big deal. I don’t remember. All I know is it reminded me of scratchy. That’s all I’m saying...and no, there is nothing else that I can think of right now.”

“Okay, thanks for your time Sandy. I’ll try to figure out what the mystery word is,” she said as she turned to leave.

Scratchy—what word resembled scratchy? Brooke thought to herself while walking toward her cab. She would have to ask around. *Where was Harris? And where did the word scratchy fit into all this?* She arrived at her apartment and took the elevator to her apartment on the twentieth floor.

Once inside, she switched on her notebook and went straight to his Facebook page—nothing. Harris’ profile page had no updates. Nothing since October twenty-eighth, when his last status update was *‘Leaving for an adventure trip, wish me luck.’* She then checked his twitter profile but there were no tweets from him after the same date. *So I’m back to square one...unless by some miracle I figure out why the word scratchy was on a mailing address.* She was certain that no one called their house ‘scratchy’. *Trust Sandy to remember the wrong word.* She tried to Google ‘scratchy Pakistan’ but the search results were no help.

She closed the laptop lid and lay down on the bed, exhausted and irritated. *Why didn’t I try to learn about him and his past? I’m engaged to a person I know practically nothing about. I don’t have an address, or where his father works. Wait...his father’s name was Syed Amin and mother’s name was...uggghh...what was the name?* Her thoughts came to an abrupt halt. *But I know where his brother works.* His younger brother’s name was Irfan. Yes! Suddenly energized, she sat up and realized she knew where he worked.

Smiling to herself, she punched the air. Irfan worked in a bank, Standard Chartered Bank. It would be difficult to locate the branch but

she was sure that once she found his brother, she would be able to find Harris. All she needed to do was fly to Pakistan. *I already have a sabbatical planned. I won't be spending it traveling with Harris but I'll spend it looking for him instead.* All she knew about Harris' country was that it was situated far away in Asia and that there was a war going on in that region. Going into a war zone was the last thing she wanted to do, but if Harris was there, that's where she needed to be as well.

Oh Harris! Why did you have to leave? Why couldn't you leave me a proper explanation? Why the secrecy? You said you'd be here when I got back, so why aren't you? She thought back to the time they had spent together. Wasn't he happy here? Was he unhappy with her? Why couldn't he explain more? Why couldn't he wait? Why didn't he contact her?

She wanted to crawl into bed and cry her heart out, but she had dinner plans with her friends tonight; or rather she and Harris had dinner plans. She wondered what her friends would say to his disappearing act. Although she knew they would sympathize with her, she wasn't in the mood to face anyone. She could simply cancel, or make an excuse, or just show up and cry on their shoulders. Or she could go and cheer herself up a bit. After all, she had a plan of action—she had decided to find him in his home country.

It would have been so much better if Harris were here, she thought to herself. He was always there for her; he was somehow right beside her, every step of the way since the day they met. They had an undeniable chemistry—a magnetic pull that neither of them could resist.

She flopped back onto her bed and reached for the remote to turn on the music system in her room. Christina Perry's 'A Thousand Years' started to play. This song had been playing on his laptop when she had had her first real contact with Harris. The memory started to flood her mind as she sank further into the tune of the song...right to the very beginning, wishing desperately she could stay there forever...



TWO

It was spring in New York and her usual breakfast place was unusually full so she walked to another diner called 'Tuck In' and thankfully, it was almost empty. She was in one of those moods when she wanted to have a quiet, relaxed breakfast and this seemed like the right place. She noticed a guy sitting at the bar with a notebook in front of him while his order sat untouched beside him.

She approached the counter and began to read the menu, wondering if the waffles were any good when the guy sitting at the counter said, "The waffles are mind blowing, so if you want to maintain that weight of yours you'd better order pancakes instead." He spoke softly in a light, bantering tone. She turned to look at him and what do you know, it was Mr. O³. This time however, he did not seem the odd one out at all, he fit right in. He wore khaki pants and a crisp light blue shirt. Before she could respond, he continued in the same tone. "Wait, you're the woman who stole my cab, right?"

She hoped he wouldn't recognize her, but he had and didn't seem bothered about the memory. She tried to look meek and said, "Yes, sorry about that, I was in a hurry."

He waved his hand dismissively as if to say 'no problem, it's forgotten anyway'. Wanting to continue the conversation she quickly added, "But if I don't order the waffles I will never know if they really are any good or not. Besides, you don't seem obese to me," she said, eyeing his plateful of waffles. "So I guess I'll take my chances." She was surprised at her own words and the almost flirtatious tone she was taking with him. Usually she wasn't the type to converse with strangers in diners, but he was different, a special case.

"Forewarned is forearmed, my lady," he replied, bowing a little with a smile dancing on his lips.

Touched by his old-worldly politeness, she introduced herself. "Brooke Mathews," and extended her hand.

"Harris Amin," he replied, adding, "Pleasure to meet you, Brooke," as he took her hand in his and shook it warmly.

He was slightly taller than her and while they shook hands, their eyes met and she noticed his warm chocolate eyes, reminiscent of dark brown Hershey's chocolates.

They gazed at each other for a moment before he spoke again. "I'm treating myself," he explained pointing to his own order. "Today is a special day. I won a prize in a photography contest. Correction, my faithful smartphone has won me a prize."

The conversation flowed easily. "Wow! That's amazing, congratulations. So, you're a photographer?" Brooke asked casually.

"Thank you! No, I'm not actually a photographer, not in the professional sense anyway. But thanks," he replied proudly. "In reality, I'm a maths professor."

"Really? You look too young to be a math professor. What do you teach?" she said.

"Ahhh! Let's not go into details there, but you should know that I'm a magician when it comes to age," he said with a mischievous smirk. "I'm a lot older than I look," he added, winking at her.

"So you're saying that you're forty-two and look twenty-two?" She asked playfully, unable to control the smile spreading across her face.

"Good Lord, no. I'm thirty-two. Wait. Was that a trick to get me to tell you my age? Crap! And I fell for it," he replied in the same playful flirtatious tone.

"So what did you win?" she inquired, changing the subject before he asked about her age.

"Did you just change the subject? I'll let it pass. I won a cash prize of five hundred dollars. It was the third place prize and..." he paused and looked deeply in her eyes. "You're welcome to see my work."

Now smiling, Brooke replied "Yes, I would love to, but are you sure you want a stranger to see it?" Just then, the guy behind the counter came around and she excused herself to place her order. Initially coming into the diner wanting to have a peaceful breakfast, she was now chatting up a handsome man and had no idea how to get out of this situation. His voice cut into her thoughts.

"If you want to have some quiet time to yourself, you can, no pressure..." he said, trailing off with a confident smile. For a second she thought he had read her mind, especially with the way he was looking at her, a quizzical smile playing on his lips. Then it occurred to her that

mindreading was not possible, but she couldn't control her reaction and now she was blushing like a little girl caught in the act of stealing a cookie.

"It's written all over your face," he explained with a wide smile.

Brooke gazed at him and wondered at his smile; she had never seen anything like it before. His smile didn't just light his face up, but the entire room and could put Tom Cruise's to shame, she thought. For now she managed to say, "I guess."

Brooke found herself speechless. No one could read her like that, except for her mother of course, who had an uncanny habit of knowing what was brewing inside Brooke's head. Her food order arrived just then and although she had thought she would move away and sit at a corner table, she ended up sitting next to Harris at the bar. Suddenly, getting to know Mr. O³ was proving to be an interesting twist in her morning.

He had gone back to work on his notebook while she tried to focus on her breakfast. Her mind kept wandering to this stranger. Judging by his looks, dark hair and dark eyes against creamy, toffee-colored skin, she suspected he might be from the Middle East or the East. She wondered what his cultural and religious beliefs might be. Could he be old-fashioned or very religious? Her father was a follower of Sant-Mat, an Indian belief in tolerance and equality, while her mother was a Christian who didn't mind her father's beliefs in the least. Brooke, like all her siblings, was allowed to follow either of her parent's religions and chose to follow in her father's footsteps. Her friends couldn't really understand her belief system but they never pestered her about it.

That morning before meeting Harris, her mind had been full of thoughts about the company she worked for and the new headquarters launch just a few months away. Sitting next to him now, her mind started to wander to more exciting thoughts such as imagining what her life would be like if she and Harris dated. He had a presence about him, one that made him irresistible and intriguing. Before she could think any further, Christina Perry's song 'A Thousand Years' started to play on his notebook. Although it was very faint, she could make out the lyrics and immediately felt like it was the perfect song for this perfect moment. She loved the song and if this guy liked it, then he was definitely her type. It seemed as if he too was listening to the song and realizing that it was perfect timing. He looked up and saw her eyes on him.

Before she could look away, he smiled and said, “I love this song.”

She found herself nodding and saying, “Same here.” Their eyes locked and it was as if he was staring into her very soul. For some strange reason, she always believed that if two people liked the same kind of songs, half their problems were solved.

He interrupted her thoughts suddenly by saying, “I feel like you should know that I am a Muslim. It is my religion and a very large part of who I am. Part of the religion is not really being able to date, at least, not in the traditional Western sense. This is part of my belief system and I feel strongly about it. Despite that, I would very much like to be friends.”

Blushing, she replied, “Aha,” wondering if she could have been any more transparent. It seemed odd at first, Harris bringing up religion and his not being able to date. However, what was more interesting was that she found herself arguing internally; why couldn’t they date? There was a very obvious chemistry between them, he spoke fluent English and made no errors with pronunciation, he was so decent and handsome to look at. So, why couldn’t they be together? It seemed as if the song was answering her questions...

*Time stands still,
Beauty in all she is,
I will be brave,
I will not let anything
Take away,
What’s standing in front of me,
Every breath,
Every hour has come to this
One step closer...*

He glanced at her and she looked away, trying her best to busy herself in the waffles. Time seemed to freeze...the song seemed to be the only thing around them, and as much as she wanted to look busy, she couldn’t. She felt his stare and looked up into those warm eyes. She knew she was lost, lost to this stranger, a Muslim, a hunk of a man. Suddenly self-conscious, she pulled herself together and looked away.

The spell was broken but his gaze lingered on her a little longer and then he asked politely, “May I take your picture?”

She froze, spoon stopped midway to her mouth, and she looked at him wondering if she had heard him correctly. No one asked for permission anymore. He looked serious. Dazed, she nodded, wondering for a

moment if it was the right thing to do or not. After all, he was a stranger and she literally had just met him. He did not appear to be in a hurry to take the photograph; instead he just went back to his laptop as if distracting himself while waiting for her to finish eating.

As soon as she finished eating, she turned to face him. "I'm ready," she said, waiting for him to look at her again with those chocolate eyes. He smiled and pulled out his smartphone.

As he snapped the picture, he laughed and said "Oh! I'm so winning another contest with this one! May I send it please?" And held up the smartphone screen for her to admire. She was stunned at how crisp the photo was and how he had managed to capture her expression in mid-smile.

After looking at it for another ten seconds she finally was able to mutter a disbelieving, "Wow...I didn't know I looked like that." It was only a profile but it was quite awesome.

"Yes, to me, you do," he replied and added, "My phone is *actually* smart, to really know which expression I was seeking." He paused briefly and then went on. "In Arabic, we say *subhan Allah* to a thing of beauty that is so rare and precious, like this picture of yours."

She didn't know how to respond to such a beautiful compliment, so she just stared at him while he simply smiled his gorgeous smile at her. He then said, "Yes, I know I have a smile to die for and warm puppy eyes but, my lady, you need to be somewhere...and it seems like you don't want to go, so let me inform you, I am here every day for breakfast. So we will see each other again."

This time she burst out laughing and he joined in. She couldn't believe how accurate his reading of her was. She was always very careful about what emotions she showed on her face, yet it seemed as if there was no hiding from Harris. "Yes, I do need to leave."

This was a rare occasion when she didn't want to leave someone's company and actually felt sad; but being a firm believer in fate, she paid the bill and picked up her purse, faced him and said, "Bye."

"Be safe," was his reply.

She stood there for a moment, standing in front of him, letting his eyes look at her, letting her eyes look at him, before she gathered herself and walked out of the diner. She was sure of one thing at that moment—he was definitely a keeper. She had never met a more decent, warm-hearted,

and good-looking guy before. He had to be a hero out of a novel. And he had been all hers.

What could have gone so wrong?

Coming back to reality, Brooke found a single tear sliding down her cheek.

