

ONE

“But safety is a big issue in Karachi. I hear so many stories of people being held up and, well, just the number of people who get shot in a day...” Ahad shook his head at Rumi.

Faizan interjected. “It’s hardly peaceful here you know. Remember the recent warnings issued? Keep your car doors locked when you’re at a red light? Make sure you can make a quick exit?” Faizan’s tone was conciliatory. He could see that Rumi was getting hot in defense of her home city. Fire lit up in her eyes, and she leaned forward to make her point.

“You’re looking at this all wrong. The reason you think Karachi is so dangerous is because of all the negative press. All you hear is how many died, and who robbed who.”

“She’s right, Ahad. There’s so much good in the city that no one ever hears about.” Mahira helped herself to another small slice of cake. The evening was undoubtedly a success and she could finally afford to relax. She glanced at Ahad and Rumi; they seemed to be getting on pretty well, barring the occasional flare-up like right now. She had rarely seen Rumi this animated though. Rumi was well known for remaining in the background and being generally a ‘lovely girl’.

“It’s the *Pakistani* press reporting the news. It’s not foreign news channels looking in from the outside. The bad obviously outweighs the good...”

Rumi cut Ahad off with a decisive wave of her hand. “We have an immature press but I was trying to make another point...” She glared at him as he snorted at that. “Karachi is a city with a population of almost 22 million people. We have a police force of 24,000, half of which are permanently deputized to the protection of our ministers and elected officials.” She raised her eyebrows at him. “What is London’s population?”

She stopped Ahad cold with that statement. A logical woman, he liked that. He made a rueful face and leaned back in his chair. “About 8 million.”

“And you have a police force of...?” Rumi drove her point home with a killing look at Ahad. She saw the corners of his mouth turn up. Was he *laughing* at her?

“About the same as Karachi’s.” He put his hand up as she opened her mouth to continue. “Uncle! I get your point. Considering the lack of policing, Karachi’s

relatively safe.”

“And considering the corruption in the judiciary, the lack of gun laws, the extremist elements which have been sheltered for so long by...”

“I did say ‘uncle’ didn’t I?” He *was* laughing, but it wasn’t condescending, just appreciative. He was gracious in defeat, she had to give him that. Rumi sniffed at him, taking a large gulp of wine to dampen her dry mouth.

“Ahad, you gave in so easily!” Faizan laughed at him. “That was just the second round. Give it another shot,” with a sidelong glance at his wife, who was beginning to look anxious. She rose to the bait, officially ending the argument and changing the subject; a Mahira specialty. Ahad was still laughing but Rumi was busy examining her own reaction to the man across the table.

As she reached for a refill of her wineglass, she watched him under her lashes. He was relaxed and elegant in black, lounging back in his chair with nonchalance. Even in the midst of their argument, he had been charming; he hadn’t really been riled up at any time. Unlike her! Was this uncharacteristic reaction because of him, she wondered, or just the fact that she was finally on a real vacation after six years? She sighed. Maybe it was the alcohol—she hadn’t gotten soused in years—but she was feeling restless and a bit reckless.

She studied his hands resting on the table. He had long fingers, and she suddenly itched to see his palms. Would they be callused or smooth? So reckless... Rumi was building up a steamy scene in her mind when she looked up to find dark eyes watching her.

She quickly looked away but not before she glimpsed the laughter in his eyes. She wasn’t the blushing type but Ahad could see her faint embarrassment at being caught staring. He smiled to himself and shifted his weight slightly. Her eyes darted towards him again and this time he saw annoyance. This was definitely turning out to be a fun evening.

Mahira, in the meantime, had successfully ended the debate on safety, but was rapidly heading down another wormhole. “Sorry guys,” she said, referring to the two men at the table, “but you’re way off base. Vital Signs was much better than Junoon. They had more popular songs and,” with an apologetic glance at her husband who was intensely involved in the double-layer chocolate cake she had made, “Junaid Jamshed is soooo much better looking than Ali Azmat.”

“Obviously a redeeming factor,” Ahad said drily, “but Vital Signs was bubblegum pop. At least Junoon created new music—not just remakes of

something they picked up from Top of the Pops.”

“You know, we used to watch that on video? Top of the Pops, I mean. We get everything in Karachi.” Trying to defuse another pointless dispute, Rumi thought she sounded a little dreamy and peered into her wineglass. It was empty. Damn. When did that happen?

Ahad turned his head at her smoky voice; his gaze lingered on her soft, crimson mouth. A corner of his mouth turned up at her inane comment. She interested him. A few minutes ago she was a firebrand, a lioness defending her cub, and now she looked like a sultry *rani*, languidly entertained by the common folk. He played along, for now.

“Faizan, get your woman under control! She’s lusting after other men *right* under your nose.” Mahira rolled her eyes at Ahad’s lazy statement, but Faizan remained unfazed.

“I have to let her, Ahad. The woman’s insatiable. I get a little welcome relief this way.”

Mahira snapped her napkin at him. “Go check on the kids. They should be asleep by now. I’m going to clear up here, and we can move to the living room.”

Rumi sat up. “I’ll help you.” Bad time to be daydreaming, Rumi, she said to herself. She put down the empty glass and got up to clear the table. A laughing Faizan obediently headed up the stairs. Ahad leaned back in his chair, stretched his arms over his head, obviously not in any hurry to get up.

She couldn’t resist. “I understand. You’re a man.” She nodded her head wisely. “This is women’s work.”

“Actually, Rumi,” he dropped his voice to a consistency of velvety chocolate, “I prefer women in a different role altogether.”

Rumi nearly dropped the plates she was stacking, quickly looking over to see if her friend had overheard. Mahira, however, was already in the kitchen. She opened her mouth to retort, but nothing came out. She was lost for a response.

The laughter lit up his eyes and she caught a quick glimpse of straight white teeth before she turned and fled, the sound of his delighted laughter following her all the way into the kitchen.

* * *

Mahira had already started the dishes when she came in. Rumi dropped the

dinner plates into the sink, picked up a soapy plate and started rinsing.

“So, is this a set up? Are you trying to get me and Ahad together?”

Mahira looked up guiltily but relaxed when she saw Rumi’s wry expression. “He’s gorgeous, and you deserve a man like him. I just thought the two of you would be perfect together. I’ve always thought so, but with you and your mother...” Mahira trailed off as she looked up again.

Rumi was tall and slender and had spent the last six years working and caring for an ailing mother. Her hair was thick and straight, falling in a silky curtain around her square face. Rumi was strong but it had always annoyed Mahira that Rumi’s sister had managed to pursue her own life while Rumi stayed behind with her parents. She felt oddly maternal towards her; she wanted to see her settled and happy. Rumi looked at her fondly.

“You could have talked to Mom, you know. She would have been ecstatic if I had been married in her lifetime.” Even a year after her death, Rumi had difficulty remembering her mother without emotion. “It was Baba’s fondest wish as well.” This time, she rolled her eyes. “Get the girls married off as soon as possible. If he’d been at my thirtieth birthday, he would have been so disappointed.” Rumi lowered her voice in a weak imitation of the Godfather, jutting out her lower jaw. “You bring shame to this family.”

Mahira groaned. “That’s the worst Corleone impression I’ve ever heard!”

“Yeah, I can’t quite do it. Now, remember Zeeshan? From college.”

“Of course.”

“Well, you weren’t around when the rooftop parties got *really* fun—I think it was some months after Juveria got married. I’d have Layla, Marium, Haroon, Sabiha and Abid over, and everyone would bring a new friend over every once in a while. In the last few years before Mom got really ill, Zeeshan started joining us; he used to keep us in stitches with his impressions.” Rumi sighed. The parties on the rooftop seemed light years away. “He was also our bootlegger. He’d smuggle in whatever he could find and we’d all get drunk and stay up until three in the morning.”

“How the hell did you get away with that? Not just the booze, but how did your dad allow boys in your house at all let alone until early morning? Before I left, those parties were just us girls, bottles of coke and Slims.” Mahira missed the spicy chips that had been a staple snack for her for so many years. “And we never stayed beyond midnight.”

“Mom—she pointed out that it was safer to have them come to our house than for me to be sneaking off to theirs. Thankfully, Baba never came upstairs; as he got older, I guess he got more lenient. Mom was always too sick to make it to the roof. And they both loved Layla so as long as she was there...”

“They figured *Layla* would keep you straight?” Mahira laughed at the thought. Layla’s parents had been as strict and conservative as Rumi’s father. A few years ago, she had eloped with a colleague in defiance of her parents’ plans to marry her off to her cousin. Her family had been devastated; Layla had never returned home.

“Yup. Mom also pointed out that Baba had agreed to send me to a co-ed school and college, that he allowed me to work and that he couldn’t now expect me to hide away from friends and colleagues just because it ‘wasn’t done in the family’.” Rumi wiped her hands on a kitchen towel as Mahira put on a kettle of water for tea. “Do you know that he once told me to stop seeing Marium because we weren’t ‘the same class’ of people? I guess if it hadn’t been for Mom, I’d be married with four kids and living in the Middle East right now.”

“The Middle East?” Mahira knew Rumi’s father quite well and had been the butt of his disapproval a number of times. It amazed her that he had retained his conservative attitude despite living in England for several years before moving back to Pakistan. She vaguely remembered Rumi telling her that they had moved back so that the girls could learn Pakistani values. The irony made her smile.

“Everyone’s dream in Baba’s family—move to the Middle East, be closer to God. And, in the process, get rich off the gold you find on the streets of Dubai.” They shared a laugh as Faizan and Ahad brought in the remaining items from the dining room.

* * *

“So, what is Juveria up to nowadays?” Mahira led the way into her tiny living room. It was cozy and warm, softly lit with ornate lamps on decorative inlay tables that she had flown in from Pakistan. She and Faizan had added an extension some years back that she was fond of calling the ‘Conservatory’. She settled into her favorite chair and waved her guests to the small couch opposite her. Faizan knelt in front of the small electric fireplace and fiddled with the knob.

“Who’s Juveria?” Ahad took up half the couch, looked at Rumi and patted the seat next to him invitingly. Rumi’s reckless moment seemed to have faded a little

and instead, she roamed the room, examining the tiny bric-a-brac and knick-knacks that Mahira had added.

“Juveria’s my sister. She’s volunteering for this program that counsels disturbed teens.”

“Really? In Pakistan?” Ahad looked surprised.

“No, she’s here, in Loughton, actually. I’m staying with her.”

“In Essex? Are you going back on the tube?” Ahad glanced at his watch. It was almost eleven.

“We’ll drop her. There’s no rush, is there Rumi?” Faizan had settled himself in the only armchair in the room; it looked as if he lived there. He had his mug of tea on one arm, an ashtray on the next. Various remote controls were within his reach and he calmly put up his socked feet on the ottoman sitting in front of him. The room was far more cluttered than Rumi would have liked but she had to admit that Mahira had done a good job in making things comfortable for guests.

“Juveria married and came over here about seven years ago.” Mahira explained to Ahad. She noticed, with a smug little smile, that he seemed to be very interested in her friend. Machiavelli, she thought, had nothing on her! “Get comfortable, Rumi. There’s no rush, and we don’t mind dropping you at all.” She looked at Ahad from the corner of her eye and waited.

“You know,” he said, as Rumi finally came and sat next to him, “I can drop you off. I live much closer to you than these guys, and its no problem for me at all.” Ahad darted a look at Mahira that seemed to say, ‘I can take it from here’. “Unless you have a curfew. I don’t fancy any lectures for bringing you home late.”

“Curfew? From my *younger* sister? I think not.” Rumi shifted to avoid slipping down towards Ahad. He had positioned himself close to the center, and the cushions had dipped down a little. His arm was laid along the back of the couch, and while he wasn’t touching her, the heat generated on the back of her neck was palpable. She turned to look at him, saw the amusement in his eyes. They weren’t black as she had first thought. They were a dark grey, and the glow from the fake fire made them seem lighter.

“Yeah, Juveria married almost right out of college, didn’t she? I think that’s all she ever wanted to do, which is why she stopped working right after.” Mahira sniffed in disdain. A workaholic and control freak, Mahira didn’t quite get housewives, which Rumi thought was a little unfair.

“Well, she has two kids and that’s a full-time job. She spends enormous amounts

of time with them.”

Mahira nodded. “Sure—I get that. I’m not saying she isn’t doing something worthwhile.”

“You really shouldn’t, honey.” Faizan had sunk into his armchair, sipping his tea with lazy contentment. “Women’s movements around the world will decimate you.”

“I’m just worried about her state of mind, where she’s headed.”

“Where’s that?” Ahad leaned back in the sofa. The faint aroma of Rumi’s perfume floated towards him. He could see her slowly relaxing as the room warmed up. She shifted a little as she answered Mahira but he saw the quick glance she gave him before turning away. Her hair fell forward, shielding her face from him, a typical gesture of shyness that surprised him.

“You’re talking about her turning into her mother-in-law?” Rumi’s voice was dry.

“That, and she’s becoming very conservative, isn’t she?”

“Mmmm. The other day, she was lecturing me on ‘Pakistani’ values.”

Ahad gave Rumi a skeptical look. “*Your* sister?” Rumi had been drinking wine tonight, she was wearing jeans and a short shirt and she was leaning back on his arm. He leaned forward. “Wait, wait—your sister, who lives here in England, is a traditional Pakistani. You, who live in Pakistan, seem fairly liberal to me, and pretty comfortable in a Western setting, I might add.” He quirked an eyebrow at Rumi. “What’s wrong with this picture?”

Rumi gave him a wry look. “Your perception.” The differences between herself and Juveria always surprised people. The reality of life in Pakistan seemed to be an even bigger shock. “We have a huge population that’s mired in Western and Indian cultures, and not as conservative as the world thinks. If you watch Pakistani TV, especially morning shows, they’re all seriously aspirational. The only things they don’t discuss are sex and alcohol, but fashion is getting more revealing, TV shows are far more casual about physical intimacy, though no outright intimacy is involved, and what would have been scandalous ten years ago is just... commonplace.”

“So, the pictures of women covered from head to toe is false?”

“No. We have that too. There are extremes, but in urban areas, it’s really diverse. I do a lot of research—I go into a lot of low-income areas to conduct surveys, and the women all work, except the one that’s wrapped from head to toe

in a shuttlecock *burqa*. The rest marry of their own choice, work with other men, manage their own finances—it's not a closed society, you know.”

“And your sister?”

“That's actually not so surprising. Cultural links are so tenuous when you're abroad, you tend to go overboard in trying to remember your home.”

“Overcompensating for having to acclimatize and fit in to an alien society.” Faizan joined in.

“And Juveria is just doing the same—keeping her heritage alive.”

Ahad was gently tugging at her hair; his fingers brushed her shoulders several times, sending small shivers down her spine. The conversation turned to movies, books, art, music and what it meant to be Pakistanis living in England. Rumi curled up on the couch, warming her hands with the mug of tea and listened silently, only occasionally joining in.

She was acutely aware of Ahad's lean body next to her. He wasn't muscle-bound but he wasn't skinny either, which in her experience, was the default Pakistani male physique. And he was tall. He had stretched out long, long legs, relaxed and graceful. She couldn't imagine him being uncomfortable in any environment. She liked the constant gleam of amusement in his eyes. He had the ability to laugh, at himself most of all. He seemed to be perfectly happy in his own skin, a rare quality and one she desperately wished she could emulate.



TWO

Ahad flipped the page, trying to concentrate on the text before him. The manuscript was still being deconstructed into a simpler format and he needed to give his feedback to the editor on the new style.

When he found himself going over the same page for the third time, he dropped his pen and leaned back in his chair. This wasn't working. He wasn't able to concentrate on work.

Raindrops streamed down the window outside, soaking the light out of the room though it was barely eleven in the morning. Ahad rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, stretching a little to ease the discomfort of being hunched over a desk for the past hour. He let his mind wander.

He'd dropped Rumi off last night and had asked her out. She'd agreed with an honest enthusiasm he'd appreciated, but was wondering now if she might have gotten the wrong idea. He was attracted to her and he'd never had any compunction in going after what he wanted. In the cold light of day, however, he was reconsidering. Maybe getting involved with a *desi* girl wasn't the best idea.

The door opened in front of him and an older woman leaned against the doorjamb to stare at him.

"Still not done?" She gestured towards the papers on his desk. "You know we need that before lunch, right?" She stepped into the room and closed the door, watching her boss work the kinks out of his neck and arm. He'd been distracted this morning, which was unusual for him, even if it was a Saturday and they were just in to meet their publishing deadline. "Something on your mind?"

Ahad gave his editor a rueful look. Catherine was perceptive, sometimes annoyingly so. "Maybe." *Rumi*. Rumi was on his mind though he couldn't have said why. It had taken him all morning to admit it, even to himself. "I know I dragged you guys in here on a day off, but..."

Catherine flopped down in a chair, a stunned expression on her face. "Don't say it." She held up a hand in protest. "You're bailing on us after insisting, *insisting*, that we ruin our weekend to save one day?" She said, without heat, "You wanker."

“I know, I know. I’m just a little...preoccupied, I guess.”

“With what?” Catherine frowned at him. He was playing with his pen, twirling it around his long fingers; Ahad rarely fidgeted.

He sighed, not understanding his reluctance to talk about Rumi. Catherine was normally a great sounding board for his relationships. *Except, there was no relationship. He’d met her once, for god’s sake.* Yeah, he needed some perspective.

“I met someone.”

Catherine rolled her eyes. “Is that all? You were so serious, I thought you were dying or something.” He gave her a measured look.

“You know, I think I’ll put you in charge of finalizing this book—and I want it two weeks before the deadline.”

“Whoa. Touchy aren’t we? Calm down and tell me about her.”

“Not much to tell, really. I met her last night at a friend’s. We hit it off. She’s gorgeous, she’s a firebrand, but she’s...” He hesitated for a second. “She’s Pakistani, and young.”

Catherine raised her brows. “And that’s bad?”

Ahad moved his shoulders restlessly. “No...not *bad*, per se. Just not my usual fare.”

“So, maybe you need a change.” She looked at him curiously. “What’s wrong with just taking her out? It doesn’t have to go anywhere. Just bang her once and get her out of your system.”

Ahad gave a short laugh at that. Bang her? Unlikely. But Catherine had a point. One date wouldn’t kill him. Or her, for that matter. And if it began to feel claustrophobic, he didn’t *have* to ask her out again...

* * *

But he did.

He waited for her outside the Underground exit on Piccadilly Circus, keeping well away from the throng of crowds that moved like a wave up the stairs and dispersed into the streets. Rumi had preferred not to be picked up and they had arranged to meet a few feet away from the exit.

In a grey raincoat, she should have blended in with the crowd around her, but as she came up the stairs, Ahad spotted her immediately. Her silky hair glinted under the yellow streetlights, her movements slow and deliberate. When she saw

him, finally, she gave him a hesitant smile, moving to join him. He held out a reassuring hand to her, watching her smile settle, her shoulders relax. He had a sudden feeling of déjà vu as though he'd known her all his life.

They found a small café that was packed with people, small and intimate, and Ahad squeezed in next to Rumi at a small table by the window.

“So, how long will you be here? Do you have to go back soon?”

“About two more weeks. I've already been here a week.”

“You have to get back to work? What do you do, by the way?”

“I'm an architect. Though I do more research and planning than actual architecture at this firm. It's heavily involved in land-use and settlements.”

Ahad gave her a quizzical look. “Land-use?”

“The architect I work for also runs an NGO, which prepares surveys and research documents for the government and independent agencies. We survey the requirements of low-income housing, the detrimental effects of urban density, and in the process, we provide solutions to problems like water and sanitation, transportation, the effects of political violence on the environment. You know, just ordinary stuff.”

Ahad laughed. “Oh yes—that sounds ordinary! Do you design homes and buildings at all?”

“Yes, of course. Residences, definitely, but we're mostly contracted to work on institutional buildings that are eco-friendly, sustainable buildings for low-income or rural areas. The best part of that is finding new and indigenous processes that involve the community. There is a far more human side to this kind of architecture. We tend to interact a great deal with the people we're building for than those who do commercial buildings. It's why I love my job.”

“And you do this—go to low-income areas, talk to people?”

“Meet with builders, contractors, laborers—I'm fairly junior still in the office, so I get to do all the research and follow-up stuff. Which is great, actually, because I'm not stuck in a stuffy office, bent over a drafting board all day long.”

Rumi stopped. She'd been talking a lot, it seemed to her, and she knew very little about him. She asked, “What about you? What do you do?”

“I told you. I own a small publishing firm. We print niche books about cultures and individual creativity. Coffee table books, mostly.”

“Right—sorry, you did mention it last night.” He'd recently published a book on the people of Kalaash, a charming book that examined their crafts, their

traditions, and their culture. In the same month, they had released a book on a popular football club.

“This great illustrator had caricatures of players dating back to the fifties and we were lucky enough to get the contract. It’s flying off the bookshelves.” Pride and pleasure clearly stamped across his face, he promised to show Rumi the books.

They talked about their families. To her surprise, Rumi found herself telling him about her mother.

“My mother’s family is very educated, upper middle class, very *erudite*,” her tongue rolled over the word mockingly. “I never got how she married into my father’s family. They’re also educated, but incredibly conservative. Girls married at thirteen and expected to have six kids—that kind of conservative.

“I guess if we hadn’t moved abroad, I may very well have been married long ago. But Mom wanted us to follow our dreams. She always said that girls needed to be self-sufficient, independent, so that marriage wasn’t their only option in life. It used to drive my father crazy.”

Ahad grinned at that. “Sounds like a marriage made in heaven. How did your mother get away with it?”

“I think, because she was physically frail, Baba was protective of her. She was diabetic, had glaucoma and failing kidneys. They were abnormally small, and she was on the transplant list for twelve years. We never found a match.” She shrugged awkwardly, expecting platitudes, but Ahad simply took her hand and stayed silent. The feel of his long fingers gave her courage. “She was mentally very tough, though. She rarely opposed him, but when she did, all it took was one word, and Baba would toe the line.”

“How long was she ill?”

“Well, she deteriorated a lot after Baba died, seven years ago. Juveria was already married, so...”

“So, it was just you.” She nodded, not wanting to remember that last year. Having someone with her then would have been fantastic, and while she had plenty of family to rely on, the day-to-day responsibility *had* worn her down. She could acknowledge it now, from the distance of nine months after her mother’s death.

Summoning some of the steel that had helped her through six years as a caregiver, she determinedly changed the topic, asking about Ahad’s life.

Not wanting to intrude any further onto what was obviously sensitive ground,

Ahad told her some wickedly funny stories about his own misspent youth.

“There were three ‘foreign’ kids in school, including myself. The other two, Prem and Kamal Singh, were tortured most of their lives for their names.”

“Their names?”

“Pram and Camel.” Ahad kept a straight face as he pronounced the very British version of his classmates’ names. His own accent was awfully cockney, he said, until his mother had insisted that he learn Urdu. “She was horrified when she realized I was habitually dropping my t’s and h’s. She started sitting with me in the evenings, teaching me Urdu. She said it would open up both my exposure to our culture and my diction.” With a rueful look at Rumi, he said, “And she was right. By the time I got to college, she’d beaten the ts back into my words.”

“So you *can* speak Urdu?”

“Not really, but I can read it. Mom started me, ironically, with *Urdu ki Akhri Kitab*. I enjoyed it, but I guess I never pursued Urdu literature as much as she would have liked.” He shrugged in slight regret. “It served its purpose at the time, though.” He signaled for another round of drinks to the waiter, and the conversation fell naturally towards their favorite books, their hobbies and childhood experiences.

It was past midnight when they finally stepped out of the café. The crowd had thinned considerably and they had to walk a distance to Ahad’s car. The trains had already shut down and small crowds of people were trickling out of theater houses. Ahad saw her interest in a play, and thought, *I should get tickets to that*. He checked himself momentarily—it seemed he had already decided to see her again.

It surprised him enough to keep him silent for most of the drive out to Loughton. By the time they drew up in front of her sister’s house, Rumi was slightly nervous, wondering what had gone wrong. The evening had surprised her in more ways than one. The ease with which they had exchanged life stories was unusual for her. She rarely opened up so quickly to a man, no matter how charming. When he turned to her, she was unprepared for his question.

“I’d like to see you again.”

“Um...yeah. Okay.” Her words came out slowly, questioningly. He confused her. She had thought they had run out of things to talk about. Ahad laughed.

“Don’t sound so dispirited—it’s not a death sentence, I promise you.” He *had* confused her, but then, he was a little confused himself. What was it, he thought to himself, about this woman?

She smiled at that. “That’s not...I was just thrown with the really quiet drive down here. I had a great time tonight,” she went on, firmly. “I would definitely like to go out again.”

“The theater this time? I thought I caught a wistful look in your eye tonight.”

“That would be fantastic.”

“Tomorrow? It’s going to be a mad rush, on a Sunday, but...”

“That’s fine—I don’t mind crowds so much. Tomorrow sounds wonderful. What time, and where? I can meet you in the city again.”

“Seven in the evening? Piccadilly again—I’ll get us tickets in the morning.” She nodded, absurdly happy at the thought that he wanted to see her again.

Her hand was on the door handle and she seemed to be ready to get out. He unfastened his seat belt and reached up to touch her face. His hand trailed down to her neck, threading his fingers through her hair, and with a gentle tug, brought her face to his. Her eyes widened but she didn’t pull away.

He lightly rubbed his lips over hers. Her lips softened, parting just enough for him to sweep in, touch her tongue lightly, taste her.

Rumi’s hand clenched on the door handle as she opened herself up to Ahad’s kiss. The only point of contact between the two was his hand on her head, and their mouths. His lips were firm, but gentle, and he took his time tasting her. Rumi closed her eyes as flames licked at the pit of her stomach; she felt goose bumps on her arms and her skin tingled. With a deep, satisfied sigh, he pulled slowly away, nipping at her red lips softly as he retreated.

It had been less than a minute long, but Rumi felt like she had been thoroughly ravished with that one kiss. She remained still for a moment, staring at his mouth. She licked her swollen lips. That glint was back in his eyes, amusement again. He climbed out of the car, came round to her side, opening her door in absent-minded chivalry.

“Goodnight, Rumi,” he said casually, as he helped her out. “I look forward to our date tomorrow night.” She looked dazed. Good, he thought, taking in the full mouth, the glaze in her eyes, the clumsiness. It had been a long time since he had such an honest reaction to a kiss. He was feeling a little light-headed from the kiss himself but managed a credible impersonation of self-possessed languor. That he wanted to take her now, in the middle of the driveway, was beside the point.

“G...goodnight, Ahad.” She climbed out of the car, feeling inelegant and gauche, but managing to gather her handbag and keys in one hand. “I’ll see you

tomorrow.” Thank God her voice worked!

She didn’t remember entering the silent house or undressing and climbing into bed. She certainly didn’t remember Ahad driving away. When she eventually drifted off to sleep, all she remembered was the flavor of roasted coffee, and something indefinably *Ahad*, lingering on her lips.

