

Chapter 1

The restaurant *Ferdaus* was filled with a buzzing crowd.

The smoke around the people twisted and formed curls, illuminated under the bar lights. The atmosphere was a hazy cloud, lingering against their clothes. Several people came in seeking shelter from the pouring rain outside. The customers of the restaurant turned to look at the entrance door-bell jingling. They glanced at the large crowd coming as the glass door was pulled open, and they watched as someone new stepped in behind them.

The woman walked into the bar for the first time in the winter rain.

She didn't have an umbrella on her; her little sleeveless dress ended at her ankles, fully drenched. Her wet dress clung to her body, showcasing the outlines of her curves. In one hand, she was carrying the skirt of her dress. Suddenly, she let it go, and her long, bare arms moved upwards as she tried to fix her damp hair which had darkened in intensity due to the rain. It fell past her shoulders, the strands sticking to her face. She attempted to comb through the tangles with her fingertips.

The men watched her movements hungrily, their eager faces drawn to her and at the sight of someone new. Their eyes trailed from her face, to her wet body, then back to the movements of her hands entwined in her hair. Under her arm, she carried a book and a trench coat. It appeared strange she wasn't wearing the coat when it was pouring outside and freezing in the middle of November.

Men were left mesmerized by her, and she turned heads as she walked by. Something radiated from within her, drawing the men around her in. The women who were with some of these men noticed their gaze on the unfamiliar woman. Now they stared at her with jealousy and anger.

Who is she? they wondered.

The woman in red held her head high and waltzed in an effortless manner of someone a decade older. She walked into the bar with an uncommonly confident stride, ignoring all the patrons' stares. Seemingly oblivious to the rest of the world, she took a seat on one of the bar stools. She was tall, maybe five-foot-seven. Her white heels added to her height, their clicking in sync with the background music playing in the room. Her red dress was dripping with the rain water as it made small puddles below her. People near her noticed a long, deep scar starting on her left shoulder that went downward hidden behind the soaked fabric of her dress.

The men watched with fascination as she opened a book and bowed her head in it. It looked like she was avoiding the crowd, and she appeared to want to blend in. It was impossible though since she'd already caught the attention of her audience by simply standing out in her red dress. She ordered a vodka on the rocks from the bartender who glanced at her with curiosity. He didn't appear to recognize her since she wasn't a local.

It was as if she didn't have a care in the world, and she just wanted to live in blissful peace alone with her booze.



Kabir was busy wiping tables in the back lounge of the restaurant, when he jumped on hearing the thunder rumbling outside.

He gazed through the glass windows; it was drizzling, and the rain showed no signs of coming to an end anytime soon. He watched as the servers walked around him to reach the customers in the restaurant section.

It was then that Kabir saw her for the first time.

His eyes automatically were drawn to her red dress that was dripping water, and then to her slick, naked back that was exposed. Her face was hidden partly by her arm that was resting on the nook of her neck. His eyes moved to look at the book that she was carrying.

Was she reading when it started to rain? he wondered. Only a lunatic would purposefully soak their book.

She turned her face slightly towards the bartender as she appeared to order her drink. Kabir gazed around the restaurant and was amused at how the men around her took in her ivory skin. He couldn't tell the color of her eyes from the distance he was at.

Like everyone else, even he thought now, *Who is she?*

He'd never seen her in the neighborhood before.

Night after night, she began to frequent the restaurant, primarily the bar. She was at the same spot but in different dresses. Each night, she had several drinks, downing one after the other. Given her attractiveness, it was no surprise men approached her, but she didn't speak much to anyone besides the bartender, and it was only to order more drinks.

Kabir wondered if her behavior sprung from arrogance or if she just didn't want to speak to anyone.

Maybe it's because she's a New Yorker.

He overheard the conversation from the table near him. The young college students were betting on who would get "Red's" number first.

Red, huh? He doubted that was her real name.

Kabir saw a young man approach her, one of the regulars. He crossed his arms against his chest and smiled.

Oh, this should be good.

He couldn't hear much of the conversation since he was at a distance, but he did hear a feminine, soft voice say, "Go away kid. I could be your mom."

Kabir laughed out loud, catching the attention of the locals around him. He gave a small, apologetic smile and pointed towards his work earpiece. They didn't need to know who he was watching.

The young man returned to his seat, walking away from the woman who could be his mother's age.

She looks only twenty-five. She was probably being sarcastic.

His friends threw their heads back and howled like little children. The poor, rejected guy didn't speak for the rest of the night because he was embarrassed. Kabir pitied him.

At the end of the night, the place was empty. Kabir realized when she came, the room always buzzed with energy at her arrival. When she vacated, something was missing. He sat down on the stool at the bar and ordered a Red Bull for himself. The bartender walked over to him and spoke with him.

"What's up?" Aryan asked.

"Who's that woman who always comes to the bar?" Kabir asked.

Aryan grinned. "So, Red has charmed you too?"

Kabir shrugged, a smile playing at his lips. "She's already got a name?"

"No one knows her name so the guys started calling her Red," Aryan said.

"The red dress," Kabir commented.

Aryan was quiet as he studied him. Then he spoke again, "It's been a while since I've seen a girl who has caught your attention."

"I'm just curious," Kabir admitted.

"She doesn't talk much to me, my friend, so I don't know her name."

Kabir slapped his palm against his forehead. "You're a useless friend."

Aryan sighed, crossing his arms across his chest. "She doesn't talk to anyone at all."

Kabir was silent. He didn't know how to approach her since he had a feeling she wouldn't talk to him, not after she'd dismissed all the men surrounding her. He was awkward when he tried to talk to women which was typically why he steered clear of their way.

"I only know that she loves vodka and reading," Aryan offered.

Kabir glanced up, and he realized he had an idea in his head. He grinned and said, "For a shitty friend, you're a genius."

Aryan looked up, confused and asked, "What are you thinking?" Kabir remained silent and with a smile, he ordered another Red Bull.

Chapter 2

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