

E. Nina Rothe

**HAPPILY
UNMARRIED**
ever after



Excerpts



A Real Life Fairy Tale for the Modern Woman

Chapter Two

My love is your love

Excerpts

...We are supposed to be on the runway any second now, although I have no idea where Trish is and am anyway too busy trying to get these damned boots on. Once I actually get my foot all the way into them, I still have to grapple with miles and miles of laces to tie and what appears to be an unbelievably plentiful number of eyelets to thread them through.

Trish and I have been partners at these shoe shows for years and she is also my best friends in real life. I feel a strong sense of sisterhood with her, which is why we refer to one another as “Soul Sister”...

...I realize that my daydreaming is causing me to be late for the next entrance with my partner in crime. I still do not get the idea of wearing boots without hose, it has been the “in” thing for the last couple of seasons and I blame this fad for every one of my late entrances at the shows. Some woman-hating male fashion editor must have come up with this trend, which looks ridiculous, makes the feet sweat and the legs cold. It also must make for some view in the dressing area when I try to yank knee-high boots off my sticky feet, while wearing a mini-skirt and thong.

Anyway, I miraculously find myself at the opposite entrance from Trish’s at the right moment, staring at her pleasant smile. Off we go, crisscrossing seamlessly and turning, switching places and stopping to look back one last time before exiting from our respective entrances. I even manage to wink at Henri, our French designer, the gay man I want to have my children with, just in case I find myself still single at forty....

...After all is said and done, no one could ever guess the chaos that went on backstage.

Around six thirty, when the last of our twenty or so daily shows is done, Trish and I decide to go out and grab a bite together. I am really craving Indian food, but then again, I am always craving Indian. Trish would rather have Italian, but I manage to convince her that since I am Italian and can cook it at home all the time, it ain’t nothing special for

me. Anyway, the Indian restaurant that I have in mind is just around the corner from work....

...The restaurant is only a block away and the moment we step inside, the hot, spicy scent of chai tea and fried flat bread welcomes us and warms us up instantly. We ask to sit near the window at a small booth, then take off our coats and order a Kingfisher beer. One large bottle, two glasses. It will last us all evening and there will be some left over, for sure. Both of us are real lightweights, it is a work night and we would not want to get dizzy and fall on any customers tomorrow!

Our conversation starts right away, it is easy and honest between us. Our waiter, a lovely young man from Bangladesh with a clear caramel complexion, takes our order. Palak Paneer, made with spinach and homemade cheese, an order of Chicken Tikka—white meat cooked in a pink sauce—some spicy Dal lentils, Raita—a yogurt and cucumber dip and some of that bread that we smelled on the way in....

...I have my own agenda for getting together on this particular evening. It is cold outside and we could have spoken on the phone, from the cozy warmth of our apartments, with a nice cup of tea in hand, a hot water bottle on our tummies and tucked under the comforters of our respective beds. But I have been having a dream. The same dream repeated a few nights in a row and then last night I dreamt a key piece of information that I am just going to burst if I do not talk to Trish about it...

...It was the same man from the other dreams—he had the same shiny black hair and the strong shoulders—but instead of viewing the whole thing from a distance, in that out of body experience way I usually see it, I was in the back seat of a white Ambassador. My dream man was driving the car. My mom was also there, sitting in the front passenger seat, and we were all riding through the streets of Bombay. The crowds, the smells, the noisy traffic! Yup! It was definitely Bombay. Since he was sitting directly in front of me, I still could not see his face. Anyway, he stopped the car outside a shop with an awning that read “CALCUTTA SARI SHOPPE—We Specialize in Wedding Saris.” I had my hand draped on his shoulder and he was definitely MY man. Once he parked, he turned around and in his profile he looked just like Shah

Rukh Khan!! Yes Trish, the man who has been in my dreams lately, the one who has kissed me in the rain and has taken me to buy a wedding sari for OUR wedding, is my favorite Bollywood star! Don't you see what that means?!" I realize, after my excited outburst, that I must have been raising my voice just a bit, since the waiter with the caramel complexion is now staring at me approvingly, bobbing his head from side to side. Trish wears a puzzled look on her face.

"Wait, I'm confused. You are getting married to that guy we saw in that Matrix-like film, the one who breaks into song and dance every time he defeats one of the bad guys? But you told me he is married and with kids in real life, right?! Does that mean he is getting a divorce? Are you planning to be a home wrecker?"

"No, silly, I am not breaking up any guy's marriage. I left out one important detail. You noticed, when we watched that film together, that Shah Rukh has an aquiline and quite imposing nose, right?! Well, here is the clincher—the man in the dream had a perfectly straight nose! A pretty, perky nose with no curve to it. So, now do you get it?" I still see the same puzzled look on Trish's face, only now the entire restaurant staff has livened up and someone has put a Bollywood medley CD on the speaker system. The waiters seem to be dancing in a line, or am I imagining things?

"I'm sorry Nina, but I am still confused and now I can't really hear myself think above this music." The music has reached a dizzying volume.

"Let me ask them to turn it down a bit. Oh, excuse me!" The Bangladeshi man saunters over to us, following the beat of the song. I could swear he is even doing classical Indian dance hand movements. His left eyebrow is raised, for a dramatic effect.

"It's a lovely song but could you lower the volume a bit? We are really tired and had a very noisy day at work." The man bobs his head—a sign which could mean yes or no, or maybe—and dances away from us. Then the music is turned down quite a bit. Trish and I are pleased with the result.

"What the dream means, Trish, is that I am meant to meet my Bollywood dream man—a wonderful, gentle, handsome guy with shiny black hair, a great nose and the rocking moves, don't you see! I have always met the people who have visited me in my dreams. And it all ties in with what the little gypsy girl in Jaipur told me!" ...

Chapter Three

It must have been the roses

Excerpts

...I smell him before I see him. A whiff of jasmine mixed with coconut and lime. Then, out of the corner of my eye, as soon as this intoxicating scent hits me, I see the untucked, crisp white shirt and the dark, shiny hair. He has not noticed me, at least I do not think so, although he walks by again, this time behind me and I hear him inhale, one single, slow breath. That is how close he is to me. I have to smile to myself, thinking that if it had been anyone else, not so good looking and not so fantastically scented, I would have probably turned around, right around this time, and called him a “f...ing a..hole” to his face. Usual response to strange men in the subway who stand too close and breathe heavy in my ear. But my defenses are down with him.

A train pulls into the station and this time it is the right one for sure. Just as I am about to enter, a guy sitting to the right of the door awakens from his daze and rushes out of the car. In order not to get trampled by this genius, I take a step back, into the fragrant stranger on the platform.

He is standing right behind me but again I get a whiff of his intoxicating body scent and do the unthinkable.

“I’m sorry.” I apologize, turning my head in profile, just enough to catch a glimpse of him out of the corner of my eye. How non aggressive of me, after all it was he who was standing way too close.

“Oh, no, it’s all right. I’m sorry.” He sounds exactly the way someone who looks and smells like him should. I can feel all the muscles in my body relaxing and a pleasant tingle in my toes.

I step all the way into the train and go to stand against the doors on the opposite side. There are plenty of seats but there is some weird energy running through my body and besides, I need to have an unobstructed view of the handsome stranger. He stands leaning against the doors directly across from me, juts out his right hip imperceptibly and grabs the handrail with his left hand. He possesses a boyish charm, has a little silver hoop in his left ear and the most beautiful golden skin. I look around and our subway car seems to have taken on a Bollywood feel, with pink saris decorating the windows and marigold flowers all over the floor. Maybe it is his pose, which I am quite sure is meant to

impress me, but I could swear the whole train dances and everyone wears lavish costumes, braided hair extensions and bare, bejeweled feet. This little pop fantasy of mine plants a smile on my lips and I feel quite shy and vulnerable, something a bit unusual. I cannot face him while he stands there, staring directly at me through his light blue sunglasses, so I keep looking at the floor as if there is an imaginary mirror reflecting back to him.

When I actually find the courage to look up and resolve to glance at him in a beckoning way, I see that he is staring at the same spot on the floor, smiling the whitest, widest smile. In my dazzled confusion I try to figure out where he is from. He has the charm of a Latin man, he could be Italian or Cuban and since I did not detect an accent when he spoke before, probably born right here in the States.

At the Times Square stop, the doors open behind him and he seizes the opportunity to glide across to where I am standing, until we are shoulder to shoulder. I clutch the bag that my Italian boss Mario got for me in the Caribbean, the one I carry my dance clothes in, and squeeze it closer to my body. Panic suddenly hits me as I realize that I must get off at the next stop. Maybe I could keep riding with my beautiful stranger and pretend to get off where he does, but I do not have that much time and I could end up looking like a stalker, not to mention up in Harlem somewhere. There is a part of me that is lazy and timid when it comes to men I like and I wish silently for him to make the first move.

Another vision flashes through my head. This time, though, it is the film noir version. A black and white tragic scene of the subway doors closing behind me, the beautiful stranger still inside the train. Then, the train pulls out of the station and the stranger and I are separated forever.

“Is that Molokai in Hawaii?” He is talking to me! The bag, he is talking about the bag that Mario, my human lucky charm, gave me! I make a mental note to call my lovely ex boss tomorrow and tell him how much I love him.

My knees buckle for a moment, but I recover.

“No, it’s actually a resort on the island of Saint Barth’s in the Caribbean.” I answer calmly and feel as if I have started my dance class already.

“Oh, have you been there?” He sounds so sexy and charming.

“No, actually my boss brought it back for me. He has been there a couple of times and absolutely loves it.”

“It’s just that anytime I see something that reminds me of Hawaii, this special feeling takes over me and seeing your bag just now took me back to those times I watched the sunsets on Maui.” Seriously, it is amazing what the right person can say. This would have sounded like such a tacky pickup line coming from anyone else. But the obvious thing here is that neither of us wants the conversation to end and so we keep going back and forward, throwing corny lines at each other.

“I feel the same way about India, you know?!” It is like a sultry tango now, the whole environment around us has disappeared, but I notice the red bricks of the Forty-Ninth Street station, as the train pulls in. I do not feel the same panic that I felt before we started talking because now we have made a connection.

“I am getting off at this stop, I work on Forty-Seventh Street.” He says. I cannot believe it, we are getting off at the same stop! How meant-to-be is that.

“Oh great! I am getting off too!” I cannot hide my enthusiasm.

As we step off the train and he moves aside to allow me to pass, I smell his intoxicating scent again.

I cannot wait to kiss this man, to feel his lips on mine and to have his arms around me. I keep reminding myself that I have just met him. This must be what they mean by “love at first sight”, only it was more like “love at first smell” for me.

“So, where have you been in India?” He asks, continuing the conversation.

“Oh, I have been to Delhi, Bombay, Lucknow and different cities in Rajastan. My best friend lives in Jaipur, but he was born in Punjab.” We talk while making our way up the stairs. The people now coming down the stairs, into the station, are all pretty wet. It must have started to rain outside but I could not care less. It is like I am having an out of body experience.

Just as we reach the top of the stairs, when we are about to make our way into the dark, threatening, windy world that has developed while we have been down in the underground, he turns to me and utters the words.

“My name is Amal; my family is from Punjab.” It all suddenly makes sense.

The dream that I have been having, oh my God, how could I not have recognized this guy, HE is the man in the dream! It is the nose and the hair I saw and the feeling I felt while riding in the car, HE is the man at the wheel...

Chapter Six

An Englishman in Newark

Excerpts

I am on my way to beginning the rest of our lives together. Amal and I and our living together in Los Angeles, that is. After his final performance in the play, the Nineteenth of December in Boston, he hugged me and uttered the words I had always wanted to hear.

“Will you spend the rest of your life with me?”

OK, so maybe other women would rather hear “Will you marry me?” shortly thereafter followed by a sizable diamond ring. But the institution of marriage has never been an absolute necessity to me. In fact, it is more the idea of unending partnership that I find appealing and romantic.

Taking into account Amal’s disastrous financial situation and the fact that we have only spent a couple of months together total, because of his tour schedule, I currently find cohabitation the only sensible solution.

Back in August, right around my birthday, I attended my cousin Marco’s wedding, in Italy. It was a beautiful ceremony, the bride and groom looked happy beyond words and the reception was held in one of the best restaurants in Naples, so the food was sensational. I cried during the church service, but not out of sentimentality. Amal and I had spent three passionate—and mildly careless—weeks in San Francisco, right before my trip to Italy, and on the day of the wedding, my period was already ten days late. Ten days! This is me, I could set my clock to it, it is always so consistent. The tears I shed were tears of fear, at the thought of having a child with Amal and, as a result, having to do things “right” by his parents.

“You know, my parents will not allow their grandchild to be born out of wedlock. My sister had a shotgun wedding because of Josh, my unplanned-for nephew, and I guess we’ll make that two hurried weddings

in the family.” I could swear he sounded victorious, when I called him from Naples, before leaving for the church.

“Amal, Honey, maybe we are both jumping the gun here? I mean, I am only a few days late and I’m traveling. Maybe the stress from the trip and just being away from you after having spent three weeks together, my hormones could just be acting up. And anyway, as appealing as the whole idea of getting married wearing scarlet sounds, my vote counts for something, right? I’m just not the marrying kind.” It was not out of any special principle that I spoke up this way. Just that the idea of marrying Amal’s bad credit and disastrous financial status, along with his adolescent behavior, scared me more than just a little.

The tears flowed freely down my cheeks during the ceremony and my mind was cluttered with visions of our household, one, two, ten years from now. In my fantasy, I could see a lot of running around and yelling on my part, and a whole lot of wickedness from the boys. Yeah, just my luck, Amal would probably get his wish for a son, first time around. I felt like screaming out loud. The only redeeming factor would be the traditional Hindu ceremony, just like the ones in the Bollywood films I adore. I would have to wear the traditional red sari and no one would question it. But seriously, this unexpected pregnancy would screw up our chances of easing into our relationship slowly, one day at a time. I prayed really hard and hoped God was listening, even though I knew God was fully aware I had brought this all on myself.

It turned out that my emotional state at cousin Marco’s wedding was a bad case of P.M.S.. When I got back to the hotel, around midnight, I felt some butterflies in the pit of my stomach. Resigned about my future, and stuffed from all the food I ate at the reception, I put my right hand on my tummy and started speaking to my future offspring.

“You know, you are a lucky boy. Your father is very handsome and your mom is a good business woman. Think about all the great clothes you will have, I already own some amazing outfits for you I picked up in Ethiopia and Rajasthan. You will be the best looking boy on the block. Maybe a little gay, but always a really sharp dresser... Lets just hope you get your father’s hair and your mom’s feet.”

Then I sat on the toilet—and voila!—ten days late but as bright as ever, my monthly friend appeared. I called Amal right away. I detected disappointment in his voice, through my excitement. After I hung up, I

took a few twirls around the room but then another vision of our now imaginary family popped into my head and I had to lie down....

...I board the plane quickly and take my seat by the window. I watch the ground crew loading the luggage efficiently into the cargo hold.

"So, it was you!" I hear the words spoken in perfect Queen's English before I turn around to behold the surprise. Crispin was the man whose silhouette made me smile earlier and he has the aisle seat next to mine. We hug, inappropriately and too long for ex lovers and take our seats. I, for one, glowing.

"Darling, you look more beautiful than ever! I can't believe my eyes. I thought I saw you in the terminal, fighting with that midget who was trying to steal your luggage, but I wasn't sure. And the last thing I wanted to do was distract you from your battle." His eyes twinkle. I am almost positive he is making fun of me.

"You look fantastic too, Cris. And I wasn't fighting with a midget back there. I was consoling a child. You know children, those lovely creatures of which you have, oh let me see, two of your very own! How are the kids, how are the ex-wife and wife number two?" It is a mouthful, but then Crispin is a very complex man. He is also even more handsome than I remembered.

"Well, you might want to phrase it this way: how are the kids and the ex-wives? I got a divorce from my second wife. I am now in the market for number three. How lucky we should meet again, after so long." He winks. Crispin and Amal are as different as night and day, physically and in every other way.

"How long has it been, Nina, two years at least, right?" He could be ordering a sandwich at a deli but with his accent, my name sounds like a Shakespearean sonnet.

"Hum... Are you implying something Cris? Because I must stop you right there if you are. I am spoken for. I am on this flight, moving to Los Angeles, to be with this man. I believe he is the love of life. Although, I am so mad at him right now, I could scream!" I am not sure if it is because I am so angry at Amal, but I feel an easy closeness with Crispin. It reminds me of the times spent together and all the wonderful talks we had. Everything sounded smart when he was involved in the conversation. We would read poetry to each other, speak at length about our world travels, drink amazing champagne and lie in each oth-

er's arms. No commitment, no flying across the country to give it my all, no hard work for the sake of the relationship. Just two people, really into each other, spending the moments they had together with as little space between them as possible.

I turn, because Crispin's hand rests on my arm. Was that a shiver I felt? It is getting to be a chronic condition these days. I thought it only possible when Amal was in the room.

"Darling, the flight attendant wants you to buckle your seat belt. Do it please, I beg you, so we can take off. You are clearly holding up the plane." How funny, Crispin. Well, at least the quivering feeling is gone. I must remember to thank Crispin for killing the mood. It is all coming back now. The downside to this man—apart from the "married with children" issue which he thinks has been resolved now—is his condescending attitude outside the bedroom. In bed, he was always free and uninhibited. In life, he can be a damn pompous ass.

Nevertheless, I turn to take in his gorgeous profile and try to remember the words to "The Road Not Taken." I can only think of the last stanza.

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

I am not sure whether Amal or Cris are the road less traveled. And I cannot remember the explanation Mr. Jones, my eleventh grade English teacher, gave to the class. Some special, code-cracking truth that, at the time, I wrote down in my notebook as the meaning of life.

"Anyway, what's this rubbish I hear about you finding the love of your life? Haven't I taught you anything?" He takes hold of my face. He smells fresh and his hands feel soft yet masculine. I want to be mad at him for still making me feel like an inexperienced little girl but I cannot focus on anything other than his aqua blue eyes.

"Love does not pay the bills, Darling. Love does not keep you safe in a storm. Love does not challenge your mind nor does it nourish your body. Now, hold on—I know what you are thinking. But it isn't love that gives you that intense, pleasurable feeling. It's passion, that is

different. You and I had passion. You might be “in passion” with this chap, I shall give you that much, but I guarantee a disaster if you have made any decisions based on love. What is the boy’s name anyway?” I hate it that he calls him a boy. He is doing it again, belittling me, my feelings. He makes it sound like I am in heat. “In passion,” I’ll show you Crispin!

“The MAN’s name is Amal. He is a wonderful, loving...” Cris interrupts me! Aagh.

“Amal... Oh, the boy is Indian then? You should have said so right away! It is all the Kama Sutra he has been practicing on you that has you speaking of love! I should have known. I give it six to eight months. Let me see. I will be on a hunting expedition in Tanzania, then up to visit my mum in Wales and in April, I open in a play in the West End. By the end of that run, it should bring us both to the end of August and I know you will be thinking differently then. If you have outgrown your sentimentality, I can offer you security, sparkling conversations, a wicked good time in the sack and two lovely, ready-made children who would only visit us on weekends. Love, I do not do, but by then, I guarantee, neither will you.” He sounds so sure of himself. All he has managed to do is feed within me my feelings for Amal. I unexpectedly plant a kiss on Crispin’s cheek. His little speech has convinced me I am traveling to the right destination. We spend the rest of the journey exchanging light conversation and pregnant glances....