

# TAKE A *CHANCE* ON ME

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# ***Take a Chance on Me***

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*“Life without Love, is No Life at all”,*

– Leonardo da Vinci

# Preface

The characters of this book came to me fully formed one day. I had never in my wildest imaginations ever thought of writing a book, let alone publishing one. But once the characters settled in my mind, they refused to go away and one day, I just opened my laptop and started to write and slowly but surely a story emerged. I have always been a lover of romance novels. They are happy books and have always made me smile. So when I reflect, it's just natural that I have written a romance book.

This book is truly a work of love and would have been impossible without the support and encouragement of some very special people.

First off I would like to thank my husband Romel. His unwavering belief in me made it possible to take this book forward. You truly gave me my wings!

My sister, Kiara, who read every revision without hesitation and gave her honest opinion each time. Archana, Navneet and Anu who were among the first to read this book and encouraged me to publish it. And finally, my friend, editor and publisher Nirja without whose support this book would never have seen the light of the day.

Thank you all!

# Chapter 1

“Damn, I am so late today.”

Keya Karia swore softly to herself, tapping her hand impatiently on the steering wheel of her BMW X6, waiting for the signal to go green. The quarterly management meeting was scheduled to start at ten in the morning and she was already forty five minutes late. Being Technology Chief of Sehgal Systems, she was scheduled to make a presentation in fifteen minutes and she needed to rush. This meeting was extremely important and though they might forgive her the late coming, she surely wouldn't be forgiven for missing her presentation slot.

“Oh God, what a mess,” she said aloud.

She had returned to Mumbai late last night after attending a successful business meeting in Vienna. The long hours she had put in the previous week, to ensure that the meeting was successful, had started taking their toll. She had woken up late, oversleeping, despite the shrill ring of her alarm. She had even skipped breakfast and driven as fast as she could in the chaotic, Monday morning, Mumbai traffic. But despite her best efforts she hadn't yet made it to her office.

The signal turned green and Keya pressed down on the accelerator, zipping as fast as she could till she finally entered the gates of the Sehgal Corporation and parked her car in the first available slot she found.

Keya entered the lobby of her office building and rushed to catch the elevator just as the doors were about to close. She quickly pressed the button for the top executive floor and glanced at her face in the elevator's mirror. This one quick glance was enough to confirm that a trip to ladies room was a must. Her hair looked unkempt and was all over her face. Shoulder length and dark, she usually tied it into a top knot, while at work. But today being the scuttle that it was, she had barely had time to run a comb through it. She could not go in for a meeting looking like she did!

She exited the elevator in a half run and flashed her access card at the entrance door which swung open as she pushed. The board room was directly in front of her. She could see through its glass doors that the meeting was in full swing. She dashed down the left, towards the rest rooms, the sound of her heels muffled by the plush carpeted floor beneath her feet.

As Keya rounded the corner, she walked straight into a human wall. The air escaped with a whoosh from her mouth and a second later she was falling backwards. Her eyes widened in panic knowing there was nothing she could do to stop her fall. But before she could hit the ground, strong hands reached forward and gripped her waist to steady her. She was now firmly held and realized that she was pressed against a very virile male body. She looked up to find herself drowning in eyes the color of molten honey and a face that could be on the cover of any glossy magazine. Her eyes widened in shock.

This guy was simply gorgeous.

He was fair with features so chiseled; it felt like they were carved out of rock. His dark hair was cropped and spiked as per the latest trend. On second thoughts, he must have been on the cover of a magazine, because she was certain that she had seen him before. Before she could consider that thought, his luscious and full lips were curving into a smile.

It was obvious that she was staring. Belatedly she realized his hands were still holding her and she was pushed up against his chest.

Suddenly she felt the strangest of sensations enveloping her body and mind. Every inch of her body that was in contact with his was growing warm. She shook herself out of this unknown reaction and stepped back from him.

"I am sorry," she told the stranger.

She gave a regretful smile and a slight shrug of her shoulders. "I am in a hurry and I just didn't see where I was going."

"No damage done," he replied, smiling back at her.

"Well, thanks for stopping my fall. I really need to rush now."

She gave him another smile and disappeared from his sight, as she turned the corner ahead of her.

Kabier Sehgal was zapped. He couldn't believe that his body had reacted so spontaneously to this unknown woman who had collided into him. She was about five-four, five-five max, with dark eyes, dark hair, and a creamy white complexion on a heart shaped face. She was definitely pretty, although not the type of woman he was normally attracted to. But, he thought with a wry smile, her body had curves at all the right places.

Who was she and more importantly what was she doing on the executive floor of his company? Perhaps she was one of the assistants of the managers now currently in the board room.

Well, there was no way he could know who she was! After all, he had

just returned from London a month back, succumbing to pressure from his grandfather to take his place as the managing director of the Sehgal Corporation.

His grandfather Janak Sehgal had started this company from scratch forty years ago and had built it to be one of the most successful business empires in the world. They had a foothold in several businesses starting from real estate, to hotels, automobiles, telecom and media and also IT. They had a presence in several countries. He himself was heading the US and European offices until recently, operating primarily out of London and New York.

The ringing of his cell phone jolted him back to reality. After all, it was to answer this call that he had left the meeting! He checked the number on the screen and walked quickly towards his office which was in the left wing of the executive floor. The right wing being used by his grandfather. He shut his office door and stood facing his desk. He pushed the button on his cell to answer and said “Yes.”

“Mr. Sehgal, I am calling from the investigative agency you...”

“Yes, I know. Do you have the information I asked for?” Kabier said cutting off the guy.

“Yes sir, my agency has gathered preliminary information that a woman was involved in the last two failed contracts with ACC.”

“Do you have a name?” Kabier asked.

“We suspect a woman, Keya Karia; she works as the Technology Chief in Sehgal Systems.”

“What proof do you have that it was her?”

“We have photographs which show her dining, recently, with the owner of one of your competitor organizations, Fortuna International.”

“That’s not enough evidence to prove that it was this woman, Keya, who had passed on the necessary information,” Kabier said coldly.

“True. But since the first contract was won by Fortuna International, the suspicion does pile up. Also, a source from the other competitor, Eclipse Systems, has confirmed that there was a woman involved, from Sehgal Systems, who gave them the information regarding the price that you were offering. Since Miss Keya is the only woman with apparent access to such information in the office, we are presuming it’s her.”

The man paused to give Kabier time to digest this latest news before continuing.

“Additionally, Miss Keya’s personal account shows two payments of



fifty lakhs, one before the first transaction failed and the second after the second transaction failed. We haven't yet been able to verify from which accounts the money was transferred."

Kabier was silent. The woman was getting paid extremely well for passing on sensitive information. But that was natural, he thought, since the contracts were worth multimillions of dollars for the organization that won them.

He thought for a while. "What else do you know about this woman?"

"She has a degree in software engineering from a reputed institute in Mumbai and has over the years studied and completed a part time course in Business Management while working with Sehgal Systems. She has grown very fast and very high in your organization. Being in the position she currently is in, gives her easy access to a lot of confidential information.

Furthermore, she is only 27 years old, and from her photographs, appears to be very good looking."

The man hesitated. "There is one more thing, sir, rumor has it, that Miss Keya is involved with a very senior member of your organization."

"Who?" Kabier questioned, staring unseeingly outside, through the wide glass wall on one side of his office.

"Mr. Janak Sehgal."

Kabier couldn't believe what he had heard.

"What? You do know what you are insinuating, right?"

"Yes sir, in fact, if you check with your HR, you will see that Miss Keya was hired, five years back without any prior work experience, on the insistence of Mr. Janak, without even a formal interview round."

The man continued. "Miss Keya's immediate family is a younger brother studying in England, whose education is being paid for by your grandfather."

"Additionally, she drives a latest model BMW car and has a plush apartment in Bandra. Both of these bought and paid for by your grandfather."

Kabier couldn't believe he had heard the man correctly. What the hell was going on? Bandra was considered the most up market residential address in Mumbai. His own family home was a sea facing mansion in Bandstand, Bandra. Kabier had grown up in that house and though he had lived abroad for so many years, this house was and always would be home for him.

His grandfather had built this house and had moved out, leaving it to his eldest son's family, on the death of his beloved wife, some fifteen years

back. His reason being, that every wall and corner of that home reminded him of his wife. Now he stayed in an apartment close by. Kabier smiled thinking of his grandfather.

To overcome the loss of his wife, Janak Sehgal had put all his energy into his work, making his organization one of the most successful businesses in the world. Overnight, he had changed his lifestyle from family man to someone who worked hard and partied even harder. He realized that life was too short and he wanted to enjoy every minute of it. Hence, his affairs became legendary. Though he was old, Janak Sehgal had in no way lost his charm or charisma. He was tall, had high cheek bones, and a fair complexion now weathered by age. He was a dashing man despite the fact that his once dark hair was sprinkled with an abundance of grey. It was obvious that money was not the only thing that attracted women to him. He was extremely active on the Mumbai social scene and attended every event with a different woman on his arm. His women came and went and the only thing they had in common was that they were extremely beautiful and quite young.

The older lot of Kabier's family were embarrassed by his grandfather's rather public display of his affairs. But, Kabier loved the old man to the core and he knew that all the partying and women were just a social front for a very lonely man.

Two things did not fall into place here though. In the past his grandfather had never ever spent so much money on a woman and the second was that he couldn't believe his grandfather was involved with one of his employees. He knew for a fact that, as a matter of principle, his grandfather never dated any of his staff.

"Sir, are you there?" The voice on the phone interrupted his thoughts.

"Yes."

"I'll send the evidence that I have to your office by tomorrow."

"Fine."

"Is there anything more that you need from us?"

"Not for the time being," he said and ended the call.

Over the last several years Janak Sehgal had taken a personal interest in only his software and media businesses. Though, he was chairman of the entire corporation, he had handed over the reins to his grandsons, Kabier, Sameer and Rishi. Kabier personally looked after the telecom business, apart from the European and American operations of the company. Now on his grandfather's behest he would be taking over the software business too. This

was the reason why he had been specifically asked to attend the quarterly meeting today. As far as he knew his grandfather hadn't yet announced his decision regarding the media business. He was still at the helm of things there. The media business was extremely large, second only to the telecom business and everyone assumed that Kabier would take it up eventually, but his grandfather had yet to involve him in it. His cousin Sameer looked after the real estate and hotels part of the business and Sameer's younger brother Rishi was involved in the automobile business.

Each of them had been trained since childhood to excel at what they did and hence stepping into their respective business roles had come naturally to each of them. The three cousins were extremely close and looked up to each other for support and guidance whenever they needed it. Kabier smiled fondly, remembering his cousins. The two of them were extremely excited about Kabier taking over from their grandfather.

Kabier had learnt of the two failed contracts, with ACC, last year during a board meeting of the Sehgal Corporation. They were both important contracts and losing them was a big blow to the software company's financial estimations. It had been assumed that they would be winning these again, especially since these were renewal contracts with the same company. But his grandfather in his usual style had brushed them off saying, "you win some and you lose some, that they had bigger fish to fry and that's what the software organization would work towards."

However, last month, Rishi had gotten a tip that there was some fraud involved in these two cases. On further investigation Rishi had found that the contracts were lost because the competitors were offering a better price.

Being in the business for so long, Kabier knew that the rates that they offered for providing software services were incomparable to others so he was very surprised and suspicious. Therefore he had hired an investigative agency to dig deeper.

He was now glad that he had. His suspicions were confirmed. Someone was selling sensitive information for a very high price and jeopardizing his company. Kabier had to tread carefully and find out what was going on.

First things first. The foremost being, who the hell was Keya Karia? What influence did she have in his grandfather's life? Why had he not heard of her or seen her in any of the newspapers/magazines that regularly flaunted the old man's affairs?

Ever since returning back to India last month, he had been meeting the key people in all his companies, as advised by his grandfather. But he hadn't met Keya yet. Was his grandfather deliberately keeping her away from him?

Today's meeting was intended to present the quarterly report of the software arm of the Corporation namely Sehgal Systems. The entire management team of this company was here. Being the Technology Chief, Keya Karia had to be there to present her report. But he was introduced to all present in the meeting and she was most definitely not one of them. Where was she and why was she not there for the meeting today? He had to learn more and soon before she caused any more damage. He walked out of his office, shut the door and returned to the board room.

Keya entered the restroom, feeling flushed. She couldn't believe that she had managed to stay calm despite her rapidly beating heart. Thank God for that. She rolled her eyes. No, this was not the time to think any of this.

She picked her brush out of her hand bag and brushed her hair. She quickly tied it back and secured it with a rubber band. That was the best she could do in the time she had. She put the brush back in her bag and walked back to the board room, refusing to pay any more attention to the encounter she had earlier. However, the thought that he seemed familiar was at the back of her mind and it nagged at her, as she could not place him.

Sighing deeply, Keya pushed open the door of the board room and walked into the middle of an on going presentation. Everyone in the room turned to look at her. She raised her hand up. "Sorry for being late. I hope I didn't miss much."

Her boss, Munir, caught her eye with his arm extended and his finger pointing to the watch on his wrist, indicating how late she was. She gave him a wry smile in response and mouthed a "Sorry" to him.

Her eyes darted around the oval shaped table to find a place to sit. Almost immediately she heard, "Welcome Keya, we thought you will not make it today."

She turned her head towards the source of the voice and smiled. Janak Sehgal was sitting at the head of the table and smiling warmly at her. She walked towards the vacant chair next to him and sat down. The presenter was asked to continue his report. Almost immediately the door opened again and the guy Keya had run into earlier walked in and paused staring at her.

In the same instant recognition hit Keya and she looked at him in disbelief. This was Kabier Sehgal, Janak's eldest grandson, heir to the Sehgal

Corporation. More importantly, he was the brother of one of her best friends, Sheena Sehgal. She couldn't believe she hadn't recognized him. She knew he had returned to India to take over from Janak and the announcement was going to come any time soon. She was also aware that he would be taking over Sehgal Systems. Somehow, over the last month since he had returned, she hadn't seen him even once in passing and right up till now she had completely forgotten that he was going to attend this board meeting. If only she had remembered this detail, she probably would have recognized him outside.

She had met Kabier Sehgal once before, but that was so long back. Ten years back!!!

Three things struck Kabier the moment he entered the room. The least important being that the girl who had run into him earlier was sitting in the chair that he had just vacated. The second was that he knew who she was. The third thing that struck him was that she too had recognized him - this he gathered from her stunned expression changing to recognition, when he entered the room. He felt like kicking himself for not having made the connection earlier. He was normally good at names and people. This girl now occupying his chair was none other than Keya Karia. She was one of his sister's closest friends and now if the information from the investigative agency was to be believed, then she was supposedly involved with his grandfather and a suspect for a business fraud. He took the vacant chair opposite her and thought about the last time he had seen her.

Ten years ago she had been a gawky teenager, wearing a baggy tee over leggings and thin as a reed. He remembered her, sprawled on a bean bag, in his sister's room, laughing at something his sister and another girl were arguing about. He had walked in on them and they had turned silent.

Sheena's two best friends Keya and Raashi were introduced to him. He couldn't remember the other girl, but he remembered Keya very well actually. She was slightly taller than the other two girls in the room and had an attitude that said that she couldn't care less about anyone or anything. She stared at him for a full two seconds before turning her eyes back to the TV which was playing in the background, without giving him another glance. He had tried to talk to her, but had got only curt replies back. He had exchanged a few words with Sheena and then had waved to the girls and had gone off. He never had a chance to meet her again.

Of course the fact was that he had hardly ever come to India in the

past few years and when he did they were just short business trips. Most of the times, his family had visited him in London or New York, depending on where he was in residence at that time. And in the intervening years, he had heard passing remarks from Sheena about her two best friends. The Keya he had met back then was no where close to the woman sitting opposite him now. No wonder he hadn't recognized her instantly.

He looked at Keya sitting across him, apparently concentrating on the on-going presentation and thought to himself, she surely looks different, especially considering the way she had filled up in all the right places. It was going to be interesting reconnecting with Keya Karia and bringing her to retribution if she was in anyway involved in jeopardizing his company.

Keya knew she should be concentrating on the presentation and the ensuing discussion. But she couldn't pay attention. She could see Kabier watching her from the corner of her eyes and she realized that he too had made the connection and recognized her.

A tide of memories washed over her and she just let them flow through her mind.

Keya considered the day she had met Sheena and Raashi as the best day of her life. The day she and her little brother Akash were admitted to an exclusive boarding school after their mother had passed away and their father had handed custody of both the children to their mother's father, Dhiraj Mishra.

Dhiraj Mishra and Janak Sehgal had been friends for a very long time. It was on Janak's insistence that he had admitted his two grandchildren to the prestigious boarding school set in the beautiful valley of Dehradun in North India. Keya, only thirteen then, had formed a life-long friendship with two girls, whom she trusted with her life and who loved her back with the same fierceness that she felt for them. Though the girls came from different backgrounds they were inseparable during their years at Dehradun and Keya's brother Akash who was three years younger to them had found a close circle of protective women to nurture him.

Keya was seventeen when she was first introduced to Sheena's dashing elder brother. Sheena kept talking about him and had shown his photographs to her friends. Back then he was studying in England and their paths had never crossed.

The first time Keya met him, she and Raashi were spending the evening at Sheena's and Keya was laughing away to glory when he had

walked in on them. He had literally taken her breath away with his sharp good looks and striking personality. At the age of twenty, Kabier Sehgal was every girl's fantasy guy. In the first ten seconds of meeting him, she realized that the pictures didn't do him any justice. Instead of staring open mouthed at him, which, she was most likely to do, she had adopted a cool approach and spoken to him with a confidence which she hadn't felt at all. In the end, she had completely ignored him, leaving him to chat with his sister. Raashi, who couldn't stop looking at him either, was surprised that such a handsome older guy hadn't got a second glance from Keya. But as soon as he had left they all had burst into a fit of girly giggles, commenting on Raashi's open mouthed admiration for Sheena's brother.

Keya had completely forgotten the incident until now. In the recent years, he had been based either in London or in New York and was often shuttling between the two cities. Sheena had kept her friends updated about her brother's flamboyant lifestyle and the women he constantly dated over the years, but somehow Keya had never ever bumped into him, until today.

She was brought back to the present by a tap on her shoulders. Janak was looking at her in a strange way, "You OK?" he asked her softly.

"Yes, just jet lagged, I guess," she replied back.

"Well, you are on now."

Keya walked to the front of the table, towards the screen where the projector was now showing the first page of her presentation. All eyes around the table moved to her. But the only ones she was aware of were, the honey gold molten eyes that seemed to be looking deep into her soul, judging her. She shook her head and schooled her stance into business mode and started her report.

Oh! She was good. In fact she was very good. Kabier grudgingly observed. She spoke with a confidence borne of experience and even knew how to modulate her voice to highlight certain points to get the desired effect. She sure knew what she was talking about. His focus drifted from her face to the rest of her body. She was dressed in black trousers and a rose pink silk shirt, with a purple scarf around her neck. The entire outfit was screaming elegance and expense. Her face had the barest of make up. Her hair that was running loose earlier was now secured away from her face. He thought it looked better left open. It gave her a softer look.

He then focused his attention back on her presentation and when she wound up, he took a keen interest in the discussion that followed. As head of

technology, all the heads of different technology lines like JAVA, Microsoft, etc. reported to her. It was her responsibility to ensure that all the employees were properly utilized. This meant that she had to ensure that her people had work 85% of the time and she was achieving at least 80% in most lines. Career management, training, conducting appraisals were all a part of her work and she coordinated these jobs along with the different heads working under her. However she was the person directly involved in participating in bids and submitting proposals for new contracts. All in all he figured that she was doing a capable job. She seemed to have a keen understanding of her people, their needs and wishes and she also had an efficient team in place that supported her quite well it seemed. Kabier was really impressed.

He asked her a couple of questions of his own, which she answered in a smooth and confident manner. When no further questions were forthcoming, she thanked everyone and resumed her seat next to his grandfather.

The rest of the day continued in the same mode. More presentations followed along with discussions. They stopped for lunch in between but it was a quick affair as several more presentations had to be made. During the short lunch break Keya continuously found herself in a discussion with someone. Despite being busy, she noticed that Kabier was surrounded by people at all times. She also constantly felt his eyes on her, silently observing her every move.

But now, late in the evening, she was exhausted and feeling extremely tired. The meeting was wrapping up and Janak was giving his closing comments. Finally, he formally introduced Kabier to the team as the new head of Sehgal Systems. Amidst much applause, Kabier came forward and said a few short words. He said that he hoped everyone would give him the same support that they had till now extended to his grandfather. He also said that he hoped to meet them over dinner and would use the opportunity of an informal setting to get to know them better. He further went on to describe his plans, in brief, for the company and said he hoped everybody could contribute towards realizing them.

Keya watched him talk, he was extremely confident of his role and station. He looked each person around the table in the eye and in his smooth and graceful manner put everyone at ease and assured them that the handover from grandfather to grandson would not in any way be harmful to any of them, but in fact would be mutually beneficial to all of them. He signed off



with thanks to each and every one of them and hoped that they could make time to meet him personally over the next weeks to help him get accustomed to the business.

He really was brilliant. No wonder Janak was handing over the reins of his organization, the one that he had built and nurtured, to him, Keya thought.

## Chapter 2

Usually, Keya looked forward to meeting her colleagues in a more informal setting. However, today she was just not in the mood. Meeting Kabier had disturbed her more than it should have. It was not like anything significant had happened between them. She had bumped into him; he had saved her from falling. Full stop. Nothing more had transpired.

That her body had felt the most divine feeling being pressed against his, was not something she wanted to dwell on. No, that kind of thinking would not get her anywhere. Besides, she had to work with him, soon, if she understood correctly from his speech to the management. So she had to get a grip on herself and learn to relax around him. She was not a teenager any more.

The dinner was al fresco on the lawns of one of the Sehgal Hotels which was located just off the sea shore. It was a premiere hotel, in a prime location in the Mumbai suburbs. The lawns were beautiful at this time of the year and opened out to the sea. The gentle sea breeze blew softly through the palms that were dotted around the lawns. When lit up completely, the lawns looked like they were straight out of a child's fairytale book. This was the highlight of the hotel and also one of its main assets, making the hotel an extremely popular setting for weddings.

Since this was a small gathering, a small part of the lawns, overlooking the sea was set aside for the dinner party.

Kabier looked at beauty and splendor around him with pride. This was one of the Sehgal group's oldest and most magnificent hotels and he was extremely proud of it. It was at par and even better than some of the best hotels in the world that he had visited. The thirty odd people that had gathered there before he arrived indicated that the party was in full swing.

Kabier walked towards the party and paused inside a quiet alcove under a majestic palm tree, quietly observing his grandfather and Keya having a private conversation some distance ahead. She was animatedly describing something to his grandfather. Suddenly, as if sensing his presence she turned and looked straight into his eyes and stopped whatever she was saying. Sensing her distraction, Janak turned around and saw Kabier. He waved him over to join them.

“Kabier, my boy, come here, have you met Keya?” Janak asked him.

Kabier looked at Keya and replied, “If I am not mistaken, it was once, ten years ago, wasn’t it Keya?”

Keya smiled, nodding in reply.

“Kabier you need to hear this. Keya was just telling me of her successful business trip to Vienna.” Janak said.

“Really?” Kabier said.

“Sehgal Systems has put in a bid to replace the existing, and mind you very old, hospital software system of one of the biggest chain of hospitals in Austria with our very own product ‘Medisys’. Keya had gone for the final discussions and it seems that we may very well win the contract.”

Kabier knew that ‘Medisys’ was the flagship healthcare product of Sehgal Systems. It was a complete hospital management and billing system.

“How big is this chain?” Kabier questioned Keya, looking at her.

“It’s got four big hospitals in Vienna and ten smaller hospital units, catering to towns around Vienna. So, pretty big I would say.” Keya replied calmly.

“How come this wasn’t a part of your report then Keya?” Kabier asked her

“Well, to be honest, we haven’t yet signed anything with them, but I am positive that they will come to us. They liked our product a lot. And we are better priced than most of our competitors,” Keya replied confidently.

She went on to add “We’ll know our fate in two weeks, but I am sure that we’ll win this one.”

“Good, I am glad and this time, Kabier, if we win you have to go and sign the deal yourself. This way you get a 360 degree view of our software business. And Keya is the expert here, in this field. She can answer any questions that you pose.”

Janak glanced up then and acknowledged an executive trying to get his attention. He turned back to Keya. “Anyway, I see someone who I need to talk to. Why don’t you two catch up? I’ll see you later.”

Keya turned to look at Kabier. “So you’ve finally decided to take the mantle from him?”

Kabier shrugged his shoulders and replied nonchalantly, “Yes, I suppose it had to happen someday. And I would prefer that he slows down while he still has some energy left in him. He’s been active on all fronts for so long, that I think he deserves a long break. Not that he would ever agree to

that.”

“And,” Kabier said, “what have you been up to since I last saw you?”

“Well, quite a lot actually, but mostly, I have been busy with my work in Sehgal Systems.”

“Quite the career woman, it seems!” he retorted sarcastically.

Keya narrowed her eyes at his tone. “Well, why not? I don’t see the harm in that, do you?” she challenged him back.

He looked at her for a few seconds. “No, I don’t. And what do you do when you’re not working?”

“The usual stuff that people do. Unwind at home, meet friends, well, like I said the usual stuff,” Keya shrugged and replied.

And it went on after that, every reply she made was followed with another question.

Keya felt like she was on the hot seat of an inquisition, with Kabier asking all the questions and not giving her the chance to ask him anything in return.

Clearly Keya was evading any reply that was even remotely personal, Kabier thought. Each time he tried to dwell into her background or quiz her on a more private topic, she very cleverly replied with a general comment. It was getting more and more obvious that she didn’t want to talk to him about her personal life.

I will uncover your secrets Keya and if they are as I suspect, then you will answer to me, he silently promised.

They started moving towards the center of the lawn where they joined a group of people discussing the political situation of the country. Politics not being her favorite subject, Keya stood silently and let the conversation flow around her. Kabier, she realized was quite actively updated on not only the international political scene but the Indian one as well and was quickly engaged in the conversation.

She ought to be proud of herself, Keya thought. She had actually managed a calm conversation with Kabier, although her heart had been beating so fiercely ever since he came up to her and Janak. She observed him while he was talking. He was superbly built and had a body that indicated that he spent a lot of his time in a gym. He was wearing a charcoal grey suit with a white shirt and black tie.

He smiled and chatted easily with people and showed none of the tension that was so clearly visible when he was talking to her. She had a

feeling that the entire conversation with him earlier was a way to find fault with her. But that was strange since she had only just met Kabier. Still, she felt that he didn't like her or rather he didn't approve of her. She shook herself. She was just imagining it for sure. What possible reason could Kabier have to dislike her? She was not making any sense to herself now. She surely must be more tired than she felt, for her brain to be working in this direction. Unable to concentrate on the ongoing discussion, she tried to recollect all that she knew or had heard of Kabier.

As the first born grandson of Janak Sehgal, Kabier had been born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. His father had passed away when he was still a boy and Janak had played an active part in his upbringing. Keya had met Kabier's mother a number of times over the years. She couldn't say she was extremely close to his mother, but they did have a good relationship borne by the fact that her daughter and Keya had been friends for several years. She had always been courteous to Keya and clearly she loved her children dearly. She was involved in a number of charities and took her welfare work very seriously.

Janak had six grandchildren. Kabier was the eldest, followed by Sameer, his brother Rishi and Kabier's sister Sheena. Sameer and Rishi's twin sisters Shauna and Rhea were the youngest of the lot. Janak had ensured that they all got the best possible education. Still, Kabier was by far his favorite and Janak had left no stone unturned to ensure that when the time came, Kabier was more than ready to take over Janak's place in his business empire. Kabier had joined the European business at a very young age to learn the ropes. And he had learned fast! In a matter of years he had turned around the European operations into a major money making venture and with his sharp acumen and keen business sense had expanded its base to the U.S. He was known to be a ruthless businessman, very cut throat in his deals and he always got what he wanted.

His personal life had seen a multitude of beautiful women entering and leaving. He had no steady girlfriend that she had heard of in recent times. His last being a top Indian model, one he apparently dumped when she started hinting of marriage. Yes, Sheena had kept them entertained often enough by talking about him. Being extremely good looking and very rich, he was bound to get a lot of attention from women. But there was no woman who had held his attention long enough to make him think of settling down.

The ringing of her cell phone pulled her out of her reverie. She

excused herself and walked forward away from the chatting group and answered.

“Hello,” Keya said.

“Keya, sweetie, where have you been?” It was Sheena.

Keya smiled fondly.

“Sheena, how are you? I just returned from Vienna last night and today was this big management meeting. Now I am at this business dinner.”

“Hey my big brother must have been there?” Sheena asked referring to Kabier.

“Oh yeah! And I was quite shocked to see him!”

“Yeah, I can imagine. It’s been years since you met him. Anyway, where are you now?”

Keya told her.

“Raashi is with me and we’re coming to pick you up. We are just a few blocks away and with Raashi driving I’d say ten minutes max,” Sheena said.

“Sheena!!! That’s not possible. Didn’t you hear what I just said? I am at a business dinner. I was already late for the meeting. I can’t possibly miss the dinner now.”

“Hang on, I am putting you on speaker. Raashi try and talk some sense into her please.”

“Hello darling, come out with us tonight. I want to hear all about your time in Vienna,” Raashi drawled.

“Hey Raashi!! Today is impossible. My boss will kill me.”

“Keya, your boss reports to Janak and remember, you are one of Janak’s angels! No one can touch you as long as he is around. So get out there and pull some rank girl!!”

Keya smiled and walked forward. Keya, Raashi and Sheena – Janak’s angels. He had given them this nickname so long ago. All three of them were close to Janak. Neither of them had a father and he had played the role of a father figure to each of them for so long. The three of them confided in him, and took his advice and suggestions seriously. He was always there for them. Though he called them his angels, in reality, he was theirs.

“Keeeeeeeya are you there?” Raashi yelled down the phone.

“Yes, I am here. At least tell me what the rush is about.” Keya realized that she had walked quite a distance further from the party and from where she was standing she was completely hidden by the palms.

"I don't know, Sheena is the one with some news and she says she'll tell us when we are together. Sheena come on! What's up?" Raashi asked in the background.

"Well, I wanted to wait till Keya was with us, but since Keya is acting all pricey, I'll tell you my news, now. Perhaps that will convince her to come." Sheena paused, adding the desired effect and said, "Rajiv, proposed to me last night, and I accepted."

"Oh my God, that is awesome!!" Keya said

"Super! This is the best news ever," said Raashi.

"Sheena, you have made my day girl! Oh, I can't wait to meet you two. This is so exciting. When is the Big Day?"

"Hang on Keya, there is, one slight problem, Kabier doesn't know yet and Rajiv still has to meet him to formally take his permission."

"Yes, but what's the problem, doesn't Kabier know that you two are seeing one another?" Keya asked her.

"He does," Sheena said slowly. "But he doesn't know it's this serious. He considers Rajiv to be a rich playboy. In fact, Kabier has been warning me against certain heartbreak, if I went in too deep with Rajiv. So I am a bit worried."

"Have you told Janak?" Keya asked.

"I told him and mom yesterday. They are thrilled with me being so happy. But you know I can't do anything till Kabier approves. Frankly, I think he is going to throw a fit. And both Rajiv and Kabier are so important to me," Sheena said in a low voice.

"Don't worry Sheena, Kabier will come around. Rajiv is a darling and it's so obvious to everyone that he loves you very much. And the playboy lifestyle he had, has been a thing of the past since he fell for you. I am sure Kabier will accept him and if he doesn't I will make it a personal quest to convince Kabier to accept."

"Convince Kabier to accept what?"

Keya whirled around, shocked to see Kabier standing right behind her and looking at her accusingly.

"I have to go. Call me when you get here," Keya said into the phone and switched off.

"You haven't answered my question, Keya. What are you going to convince me of?"

"Nothing, what are you doing here anyway?" Keya replied, trying to

change the subject.

But he wouldn't budge.

"Don't brush me off, answer me," Kabier said getting angry.

Keya decided honesty was the best way forward. "I was on the phone with Sheena and she has some news to give you." Keya sighed. "That's all I can say at the moment."

"I don't like this. Does this have something to do with my sister and that playboy boyfriend of hers?" He asked pointedly. Keya was surprised at his astuteness. She just stared blankly back at him.

He shook his head angrily. "Looking at your expression, I guess that I was bang on target. In any case, I have let this doomed relationship continue for far too long. So, let's get to the point. What crazy scheme has my sister hatched that she has enlisted your support to convince me of? Tell me. I insist."

Kabier couldn't believe this. He had been worried over Sheena's increasing closeness to Rajiv Mehra ever since he had heard that they had become an item. But he had let it be thinking that it would fizzle out. Sheena had never been serious about any of the guys she'd dated in the past, so he hadn't given this relationship another thought. But instead of that, he had seen Sheena getting more and more involved with this rich, playboy shipping magnate. He had tried to warn Sheena on several occasions in the past, about his dislike of the situation; but in her usual affable manner she had always brushed him off.

In the past few days, however, he had sensed that something was up. Sheena was more on edge than usual and since yesterday she was like a contented cat that had got all the cream. He wondered what Sheena was up to and he also knew that her two friends would support her in any of her crazy schemes.

Keya looked at Kabier in disbelief.

Was this guy for real, Keya thought? Insist indeed!! She was not going to budge an inch. This was Sheena's news and no way was she telling him anything.

"Well you can insist all you like, but I choose not to tell you anything and that's the way it stays. This is not my news to give you and you'll know when it's time for you to know," she said haughtily and started to walk away.

Now, he was convinced that something serious was afoot. Despite his having guessed that the conversation was about his sister and her



boyfriend, Keya was refusing to tell him what was actually going on. His emotions were already running high since morning, ever since he had heard the report of the investigative agency and realized that Keya was in a position to cause serious damage to not only his company but to his grandfather and sister as well. People like her didn't give any importance to friendships or relationships if they came in the way of their own personal agenda.

Besides, who the hell did Keya think she was? She actually had the audacity to simply walk away from him without giving him the explanation he desired! She might have gotten her way and been able to get around things till now, because of her relationship with his grandfather. But he was in charge now. Not one of his employees had ever behaved in this manner. He hated evasiveness. If he asked a question, he wanted it answered.

This situation was going to be no different he thought. He caught her elbow as she started walking away and whipped her around. The sudden motion caused her to stumble but before she could fall, he had held her waist and pulled her forwards. A confused expression clouded her eyes. He blinked and realized that for the second time today she was in his arms. His face was bent towards hers, his lips mere inches away from hers. He just had to angle his head a little and he would be kissing her.

God help him! He actually wanted to kiss her he realized with a shock.

Kabier was going to kiss her! This realization hit Keya the instant she was in his arms, with her hands against his chest and her face looking up into his. She saw it in his eyes, the desire that had flared up in their honeyed depths. Her mind told her that she ought to stop him before the kiss became a reality. But her body had stopped responding to her mind the moment he had hauled her against him. His hands were moving from her waist to her back, bringing her closer to him and every inch of her body under his hands was on fire.

Oh God! She wanted him to kiss her.

Kabier pressed his lips to Keya's and was lost. Initially, she was too shocked to respond. But he kept brushing his lips against hers; slowly increasing the pressure of his lips, coaxing her to respond and in the next moment she was returning his kiss with an ardor that both surprised him and enticed him further. He ravished her lips, elated that she was responding. She let out a soft sigh and that small invitation was all he needed to thrust his tongue inside and capture her lush mouth.

She tasted like chocolate. Sweet, molten and hot and he couldn't get

enough of her.

His hands were moving of their own accord now. One hand was resting against her nape angling her head to give him better access to her mouth and the other hand was on her back pushing her closer to him.

Keya couldn't believe that Kabier was kissing her. She had never been kissed so thoroughly ever before and she didn't want it to stop. Her mind stopped thinking and simply reveled in the sensations. She was melting in his arms, pushing herself against him to experience these newly awakened feelings. She kissed him back with an intensity she never knew she possessed. A sane corner of her mind was warning her that things were getting out of hand, but Keya pushed that thought to the back of her mind.

A phone rang. Once and then again, demanding attention. They jumped apart and stared at each other, shocked. Kabier looked at the phone ringing in Keya's hand. "Guess you should answer that," he said and quickly walked away.

"Hello," Keya said in an unsteady voice.

"Keya, we're outside," Raashi said.

"Ya, um, yes, um," Keya mumbled. She was numb and couldn't think straight.

"Keya, are you alright?" Raashi asked sounding worried.

"I am fine. I'm coming in a minute. Just have to say my goodbyes."

"OK we are waiting," Raashi said and disconnected the call.

What had just happened? Keya thought, stunned. She had not only let Kabier kiss her, but she had kissed him back with a passion completely unlike her. She had very little experience with men, staying away from any sort of physical or emotional entanglement with them, using her mother as an example of a broken heart. But today she hadn't thought twice when she had reacted to Kabier. This was a big mistake. One she was surely going to regret.

She returned to the party and excused herself on the pretext of being jet lagged and needing more sleep. She walked towards Janak, who was standing with Kabier and he said, "Where were you? I had sent Kabier to look for you."

"Well he found me," Keya said, stealing a glance at Kabier who was shooting daggers with his eyes at her. Well he could be as angry as he wanted. She was equally angry with him.

"You OK? You look exhausted," Janak told her looking at her flushed face.

“Tired, need to sleep, that’s all,” she replied.

Ignoring Kabier staring at her, she spoke to Janak. “Uh, Janak, could I have a word with you?” Before he could reply she took his arm and was steering him towards the exit where Sheena and Raashi were waiting for her.

“What’s up Keya?” he asked.

“Sheena and Raashi are waiting out for me and we are going out to celebrate tonight.”

“So Sheena has announced her news to you two.” Janak commented smiling at her.

“I am so thrilled. Can you believe, Janak, one of us is actually going to get married?”

“Yes dear, I want to see Raashi and you also as happy as Sheena and soon. I am getting old now and I want to see you happily married before...”

“Stop it Janak, you have years to live and as for me, I doubt I’ll ever be as lucky as Sheena,” Keya said interrupting him.

Janak stopped walking and looked at her. He lifted her chin with his hand and bent down to look into her face.

“Keya, you cannot forever live in fear that what happened to your mother will be repeated with you some day. You have to give love a chance and learn to trust again. And besides I’m sure there is a guy out there just waiting to sweep you off your feet,” he told her in a warm voice.

Keya just smiled back at him and started walking out. Janak, understanding her fears, put his arm around her and gave her shoulders a slight squeeze.

Kabier saw what had transpired between Keya and his grandfather and he was extremely angry. But, more than that Kabier was mostly angry with himself. He couldn’t believe that he had acted so impulsively with Keya. She was involved with his grandfather for heaven’s sake! Besides, how could he possibly be attracted to her? He just could not!! But his body reminded him otherwise. He was still trying to control his body’s intense and immediate reaction to her, when she had pressed herself against him and wildly kissed him back.

He normally dated stunningly beautiful and sophisticated women looking for a good time and that’s only ever what he promised them. Keya was nothing like them. She sure was good looking, but not in the drop dead way that he preferred his women. So what in the world was he thinking when he had kissed her.

She was dangerous. He had to be more careful where she was concerned. In just two encounters he was reacting to her like a school boy on his first crush. He couldn't and wouldn't fall into the same web she had woven around his grandfather.

Kabier walked forward in the direction he had seen Keya taking his grandfather.

Keya broke into a wide grin when she saw Sheena and Raashi waiting outside. On seeing her, the girls gave a squeal of delight and came forward. Immediately they were all hugging and laughing and talking at the same time. Janak stood back and quietly watched their loud display of affection and his heart swelled with joy for a friendship so rare to find in today's fast moving world.

They were really lovely he thought. Each one of them was different and special in their own way.

"Now now, girls, we are at a public place, you mind being a little quieter," he said laughingly. Sheena and Raashi stepped forward to hug him and they resumed their conversation with even more gusto.

Kabier walked out to find the four of them laughing and talking excitedly. On sensing his arrival, the four of them lapsed into silence.

Immediately he sensed that he had intruded on something.

Sheena was the one who broke the silence. "Hey big brother, come here and give me a hug." Kabier came forward and hugged Sheena, his eyes on Keya.

Keya completely ignored him and stared straight ahead. Raashi immediately sensed the tension between them and looked from one to the other in surprise.

Kabier acknowledged Raashi with a nod of his head and then addressed Sheena. "So what are you doing here?"

"The three of us are going out for a bit," Sheena said.

"Well not another late night Sheena, this last week you've been late home every single night," Kabier remarked with raised eyebrows, knowing very well that she had been out with Rajiv every night the entire week.

"Come on Kabier, I am twenty seven not seven. I know how to look after myself," Sheena retorted.

"In any case, I want you home early today, we need to talk."

Sheena made a face and accepted grudgingly.

Looking at Janak, he said, "It's getting late grandfather, we need to get a start on dinner."

"Yes, let's go," Janak said. Turning to Keya he said, "Give me your keys and I'll have your car dropped home."

She handed Janak her keys, murmured a quick thanks and not so much as a glance at Kabier, Keya got into the back seat of the car and the girls took off.

The moment the car pulled out of the hotel, Sheena commented, "Wasn't he positively medieval back there?" referring to her conversation with her brother.

"Well since he doesn't approve of your relationship with Rajiv, I guess he's bound to be protective of you," Raashi said logically.

"Actually, he walked in on me, when I was talking to you two, so he heard the last part when I said I would convince him to agree," Keya told them.

Sheena her eyes wide as saucers said, "Keya, please don't tell me he bulldozed you into telling him, because he'll kill me for not telling him directly."

"No, Sheena, I am not so easily bulldozed. But he does suspect that something is up regarding Rajiv and you," Keya said with a wry smile.

"Assuming Kabier gives his blessings, have you decided where you want the wedding? What you would like to wear?" Raashi continued changing the subject.

Keya heard the two of them chatter on, but her mind was elsewhere. She was wondering how she would face Kabier in the office over the next few days. It was going to be so embarrassing. Oh! Why couldn't she have prevented what had happened? Back outside the hotel, Kabier had looked at her as if it was all her fault.

"Earth to Keya, earth to Keya," Sheena was laughingly saying.

"I wanted your opinion on what kind of wedding I should have? Rajiv doesn't want too many people. And Raashi recommends a destination wedding. What do you say?"

Keya smiled at her and said warmly, "Sheena, of the three of us, you've always wanted a loud and noisy Indian wedding, with all the works and four days of functions et al. So I agree with Raashi, a destination wedding sounds the best, because only family and close friends would take time off to attend the wedding in a different city. This way, you can have

your dream wedding and all the fun. What do you think?"

Sheena clicked her fingers in glee. "Great! This is the perfect solution."

Keya kept silent and didn't contribute to the ensuing discussion that involved which functions, what clothes, whom to invite and so on. On any other day she would have willingly participated in this exciting discussion, but today she just didn't have the energy to contribute, what with her mind and body still reeling from the effect of Kabier.

She looked up and saw Raashi looking at her through the rear view mirror with her eyebrows raised questioningly. Keya just shook her head in return.

After they had finished dinner and had dropped Sheena home, Raashi and Keya headed back to Keya's apartment. Raashi parked the car outside Keya's apartment block and turned to look at Keya.

"Out with it Keya, what's bothering you? You have been unusually silent the entire evening. Has this got something to do with Kabier?"

Keya stared at Raashi perplexed. Her friend was as usual extremely perceptive.

"I sensed the under currents between the two of you earlier," Raashi said, continuing her line of thought.

Keya took a deep breath. "Kabier kissed me."

"What, when?" Raashi asked astonished.

"Right after I refused to tell him, what Sheena's news was. And the worse thing is I did nothing to stop him, I just kissed him back." Keya said truthfully.

"I didn't want to, but I was just so lost. I couldn't stop him and more importantly I got totally carried away. Prior to this, the only experience, I had of being kissed was a goodnight peck on the lips from one of the few casual dates I've been on long ago. And believe me that was nothing compared to the impact of Kabier Sehgal's kiss. Oh Raashi, kissing him was the most wonderful, toe-curling experience of my entire life."

Raashi stared at her shocked. Keya raised her hands up to express herself more firmly.

"Not that I want to repeat the experience. I seriously think it was a mistake, one that I never intend to make again," Keya accepted.

"This is too much. Can you start from the beginning, please?" Raashi asked her.

Keya described the entire day to her in detail, right from the beginning of the day when she had run into Kabier to the angry argument that she and Kabier had engaged in which had led to the kiss.

Raashi simply gaped at her like that was the most insane thing that Keya had ever done. Well, in reality it actually was just that, insane!

“You still have a crush on him, don’t you?” Raashi asked Keya finally.

“What are you talking about?” Keya asked her back, stunned at her question.

“Oh come on! It was so obvious to me. All those years ago, when he had come to Sheena’s room, you behaved like the proverbial ice queen in front of him and then the moment he was gone, you kept asking Sheena all those questions about him.

And during that holiday, you always made a plan to meet at Sheena’s place, obviously, just so that you could get a glimpse of him, but you never did meet him again until today did you?” Raashi asked her.

Keya nodded her head and refused to comment. This couldn’t be true. She didn’t have a crush on Kabier Sehgal. So what if he was the most gorgeous guy she had ever met and that he kissed like a dream. He was her employer and her best friend’s brother. No, she definitely did not have a crush on him, she convinced herself.

“Raashi, I didn’t, and don’t have a crush on him. Got it?” Keya stressed.

Raashi shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“Keya, Kabier Sehgal is one of the most eligible bachelors in the country today. You know his reputation with women. He is known to be a heart breaker and now thanks to you, we know he is a great kisser as well. Neither of us is experienced enough to handle a guy as powerful and lethally attractive as him. Falling for him is going to give you nothing but heartbreak and lots of pain. So, please be very careful. OK?”

“Raashi! It was just an impulsive reaction to a heated discussion. I have to work with him. He is taking over Sehgal Systems from Janak, so I’ll be seeing more of him. Nothing’s going to happen. You’ll see,” Keya told her friend and got out of the car to head home.

The next few days passed by in a blur for Keya. She was extremely busy at work and luckily she didn’t run into Kabier on any of these days. She was extremely glad about that.

Thrice a week after work she went for a power yoga class with Raashi. They were driving back after one of these sessions, when Raashi updated her with the news that Kabier had now accepted Rajiv's presence in Sheena's life and given their union his blessing. Sheena was thrilled and was busy setting a date for the happy occasion.

"Wow that must have been something!" Keya commented. "I am surprised Kabier acceded easily, I expected lots of fireworks," Keya said with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Well apparently he went ballistic when Sheena dropped the bomb shell that Rajiv had proposed marriage to her. But Sheena's tears and earnestness that Rajiv and she were genuinely in love, made him grudgingly agree to meet with Rajiv the next day. The meeting went off quite well actually, because Kabier could see how the two of them were besotted with each other and he consented. So, our dear friend is now engaged." Raashi said punctuating the last sentence by spreading her hands in delight.

Keya smiled happily back. Raashi looked at Keya seriously. "Have you seen Kabier since you last..."

Keya cut her off mid-way and said, "No, not yet. I am glad about that. I was thinking the longer I don't meet him, the easier it will be for us to forget the whole silly incident."

"Somehow, I seriously doubt that," Raashi told her seeing through Keya's feeble attempt to dismiss a situation that she had no way of knowing how to handle.

They exchanged some more news, with a promise to catch up over the weekend.



# Chapter 3

It was getting late; way past midnight, and Kabier had been working from his home office. The last few days had been tough. There was a major problem that had broken out in one area of his telecom business and he had been fire fighting to get things back on track. He had been out of office for most of the last few days and hadn't had time to concentrate on anything other than the problem on hand. Every night he had spent in his home office, working. It sure had been hectic.

The only ray of light was that his little sister was getting married. He had met Rajiv and realized that the man was completely besotted with Sheena. So Kabier had consented and announced their engagement to his entire family over dinner at his home, earlier tonight.

The entire Sehgal family was present including his grandfather, Kabier's mother, Sameer, Rishi and their parents. The twins were conspicuous by their absence as they were away studying in England. Sameer promised to pass on to them this happy news. The entire family had rejoiced and welcomed Rajiv amongst them. The women had congregated together and had gotten busy making plans.

Rajiv and Sheena had discussed the situation and had come to the conclusion that they wanted a wedding away from Mumbai. So after a lot of ideas being put back and forth, the family had chosen one of their resort hotels in Goa as an ideal spot for the destination wedding. Sheena was thrilled and had hugged Kabier warmly, thanking him for everything.

Looking at Sheena and Rajiv, Kabier had felt a slight pang of envy. But he had quickly pushed it aside, convincing himself that he was better off having his choice of women, any time, any place he wanted. He was not the marrying types and he hadn't yet come across a woman who could captivate him long enough to even consider getting married.

He rubbed his tired eyes with the back of his hand and started to get up when he noticed a sealed brown manila envelope lying in a corner on his desk. Recollecting that he had got it home a couple of days ago from work, he opened it and removed its contents. It contained a report and another smaller sealed envelope. It was from the investigative agency. He hadn't had time to see it yet. He poured over the contents of the report, which pretty

much said the same thing that he had heard on the phone. He tore open the smaller envelope and saw photographs of Keya with Rithwik Bali, owner of Fortuna International, one of the companies they had lost the first contract to.

One of the pictures showed them dining together and the other showed her walking a red carpet event on his arm. Details regarding time, date and location were written at the back of the picture. He pursed his lips together and controlled the anger which threatened to overflow. He was still at odds on how to proceed on this issue and had to quickly find a solution that would expose Keya real soon.

He knew he had to start working with her closely, that was the only way he could figure out what she planned to do next. And more importantly he had to cut his grandfather loose from the entanglement he had with her. He had to prove to his grandfather that he was being used by Keya to further her own means. He got up and cleared the contents back into the envelope and locked it in one of the glass cabinets lined in his home office.

The next morning, on reaching work he called his assistant to schedule an immediate appointment in the afternoon with Keya.

On Thursday morning, Keya received an email from Kabier's assistant scheduling a meeting with Kabier at one in the afternoon, to discuss the various sales cases.

Kabier hadn't bothered to even check her availability, before setting up the meeting, Keya thought. She had back to back appointments starting in half an hour until the end of the day. The head of the Austrian hospital chain was calling her at one to discuss the contract further. They were at the last stage of the negotiation and she couldn't shift this call. So she politely replied explaining her prescheduled meeting and requesting a change in the meeting time to another day. She added a post script, requesting him to check her calendar before scheduling a meeting, the next time. Hope that gives him the message, she thought.

In fifteen minutes she got an email – a reply from Kabier himself, asking her to meet him at two, after her Austrian phone meeting and to cancel whatever she had till she finished the meeting with him. The meeting, he informed her, would last for at least two hours if not more, so she was to ensure her availability till then.

Keya couldn't believe this. What the hell? She had a busy schedule and her calendar was packed today with engagements planned weeks in advance. God, he had created a mess for her. And she couldn't refuse to see

him a second time, he was the new boss after all. She was beginning to dislike him for sure.

Keya reached the top floor of her building at five minutes to two o'clock and paused. She had heard that Kabier was based on this floor, but she had never been to his office before. Assuming that he would have occupied the offices in the left wing, since she knew Janak's offices were in the right, she walked towards them. Keya paused on the threshold. A woman in her late fifties was sitting in front of a computer typing. The woman paused when she saw Keya and introduced herself. She then pressed the intercom button and announced Keya in.

Keya entered Kabier's office, feeling a bit unsettled at this unexpected meeting. She knew she had to face him sometime, but she had hoped it would have been on a better note than this. Right now, she was angry as hell with him.

Kabier was seated at his desk when Keya entered. She had stopped mid-way between the door and his desk, her arms folded, looking at him. The first thing he noticed was that she was again wearing dark trousers, this time teamed with a grey silk shirt. Her hair was twisted in a knot with a few strands escaping to curl around her face. He looked into her eyes and realized that she was fuming.

"What in the world was burning in the sales cases, that you made me cancel my appointments, which incidentally were planned weeks back, without checking with me first?" Without waiting for an answer from him, Keya continued, "And do you realize that I had to conduct two training sessions today for groups of fifteen people each, which had follow-ups scheduled the entire next week and now, no thanks to you, the entire training had to be cancelled till we find a slot when everyone is free?" Keya asked him her eyes blazing with fury.

"You have lost me important time and effort in simply rescheduling the appointments, which I could have put to much better use. So I hope that this meeting is not a complete waste of my time," she continued raising her voice.

Kabier pushed his chair back and settled back more comfortably. He lifted his arms and crossed his hands behind his neck, the effect showing off his well-built chest to the fullest. He looked at her for a full five seconds before saying very causally with an intention to rile her some more, "Do you always yell like that, when things don't work out your way?"

“No I’ve never had the need to do so, you are an exception,” Keya retorted. She wasn’t finished yet.

“So, is this how you conduct your business, by expecting your employees to jump when you bark orders?” she asked dryly.

Kabier drew back from his chair and walked towards where Keya was standing. “Let me inform you Keya, since I am the boss here, my time is worth a lot more than yours. I pay for your time and the time of the others. Rescheduling a couple of meetings is the least of my worries at this moment,” he told her scathingly.

“I don’t bark orders at you or anyone else. I do however expect my people to understand that I have multiple businesses to run and if I call for an unplanned meeting, then it normally is important. Finally, I am not in the habit of wasting my or anyone else’s time,” he said answering each and every one of the questions that Keya had posed to him.

“So, if I have answered each of your questions can we get back to business?” he asked her with finality in his question.

Before Keya could answer him, the intercom buzzed, Kabier went to his desk and pressed the speaker button. “Yes,” he growled

Unperturbed, his assistant simply announced the arrival of Munir Chenoy, Keya’s boss.

Keya acknowledged her boss with a nod of her head. Munir Chenoy had been working for Sehgal Corporation for several years and was a trusted employee. When Janak Sehgal had started Sehgal Systems, some ten years back, he had personally asked for Munir to head the new organization, reporting directly to Janak. Keya had a good relationship with him; he supported her on her causes and mostly gave her the freedom to run things the way she wanted.

Keya had started working for him directly, two years ago, ever since she had taken up this position of Technology Head. She looked at him, fidgeting with his watch. He was of medium height, with a balding pate, and a dark complexion that looked more and more sallow each day. Keya realized he had lost a lot of weight, and was looking unwell. On the whole he looked terrible. She made a mental note to talk about him to Janak. Keya knew that Munir had gone through a long and messy divorce two years back and his wife of many years had left him and taken their kids along with her. She didn’t know the details, but she did know that ever since the divorce, he had become more temperamental, extremely energetic at times and equally

sluggish on other days such that he would even forget what he was saying. He had stopped traveling completely, leaving Keya and the other managers reporting to him, to take his place on all important meetings held abroad or out of the city.

Kabier indicated for Keya and Munir to be seated on the sofas, lining one side of his office wall and went to pick up his cell that was now ringing. Keya looked around the office, and liked what she saw. A combination of pale cream and chocolate brown dominated the theme here. Every object and piece of furniture she looked at oozed luxury. But nothing was over the top. Kabier's huge desk dominated one end of the rectangular room, opposite the entry door. Keya noticed that though the desk was covered with a laptop, files, telephones, and a few open note books, it was neat and orderly. Behind the desk, all along the wall were low storage cabinets on which a number of fiction and management books were stacked back to back. Colorful, modern paintings covered most of the walls adding splashes of color to the room. But what she liked the most was the huge floor to ceiling glass wall, partially covered with blinds, on the left side of his desk. The view of the city through the glass was fabulous.

Kabier came to sit on one of the sofas facing Keya. He noticed her eyes scanning his office, evidently approving what they saw, before resting on him. She clearly had a very expressive face.

After his verbal reprisal to her angry attack earlier, she was quiet and pensive. She hadn't retaliated, but that probably was because she hadn't had the time to get a word through before Munir had entered.

Kabier had invited Munir specifically for this meeting along with Keya because being in charge of the daily operations of Sehgal Systems, Munir was involved in all the decisions regarding rates and proposals and he was Keya's boss. Kabier had requested him to bring with him printouts of all the ongoing sales cases for this meeting.

Munir handed printouts of this file, to the two of them.

Keya looked up at Kabier while waiting expectantly for their meeting to start. She let her eyes drift over him.

He was sitting upright, with a pen in one hand, the printout in the other, quietly scanning the information in it. He was dressed in black trousers, a beige shirt and bronze colored tie. The tie was loosened around his neck and the top button of his shirt was unbuttoned and his sleeves folded up. He had big hands she observed. His fingers were long, with neatly cut nails

and her eyes went further on to scan his arms covered lightly with curling hair, visible under his folded shirt sleeves. He exuded a supreme air of masculinity that simply could not be ignored. His jacket she saw was draped across the chair behind his desk.

Scolding herself for letting her thoughts wander, she took a deep breath and then concentrated on the printout in her hands.

The printouts consisted of names of all prospective clients, Sehgal Systems was sending proposals to, in order to offer their software services. Since Sehgal systems had development and support capabilities in a variety of software technologies, the list was quite extensive.

Keya quickly scanned the printout and grimaced. Her boss had obviously taken a printout of the wrong file. This printout only listed the company names they were sending proposals to. The actual file contained more specific details about each of the cases and she was sure that was the information that Kabier was seeking. She shook her head and thought that she would have to rack her memory on each case to be able to answer Kabier's obvious questions. There was no time to take any fresh printouts.

As the meeting progressed, Keya explained each case that was in the list; giving him details like their history with the company, the type of service that Sehgal Systems was proposing like new development or maintenance and support, the rates at which they were offering their services and which of their competitors were tendering proposals for the same contracts. She also provided him with details of how many of their people would be needed to complete the service, the time frame for which they would be needed, and how much money Sehgal Systems would stand to make, if they won the contract.

Kabier was impressed with Keya's professionalism. He realized that she was quite thorough in her descriptions. She was directly in contact with a lot of the external companies herself and she could predict more or less whether they would win the contract or not. Kabier asked her several questions which she answered confidently. She very rarely ventured an opinion from Munir and every time Kabier asked him a question, he would mostly refer to Keya to provide an answer. It was increasingly obvious to him that though Munir was the deciding and signing authority on all the contracts, he was just a figurehead and most of the decisions were taken by Keya directly.

He grimaced to himself; this was going to be tougher than he thought.

Keya very clearly had intimate knowledge about each case and thus was in a position to jeopardize any case she wanted by simply changing the rates they offered. Munir, very obviously would accept her decision and she could very easily influence Kabier's grandfather.

After more than two hours, they had exhausted the entire list. "So, Keya, all the information that you have given me, just now, is it just in your head or is there some place I can find it when I need to?" Kabier asked.

"The information is available in a file on the central server, I'll send you the link in an email," she told him in a curt voice, angry at his rude question.

He then addressed the two of them. "Thank you both for spending your valuable time in updating me and I appreciate how you two have handled this on your own before, but henceforth I'd like to be involved in every proposal we make to any of our prospective clients. All the rates that we offer have to be run by me first and every proposal that is created will be signed by me. Is that OK?" he asked them, fully expecting them to accept.

"OK by me," Munir said. "But it's Keya you'll have more contact with, I normally come into the picture when the proposal is ready to be delivered."

Kabier looked at Keya. "Please schedule a weekly meeting with me where we can evaluate the status of each of the cases in detail. Also every proposal we win or lose henceforth, I need to be informed about. Clear?"

Keya just glared at him disbelievingly. He was so bloody arrogant, annoying and irritating. Was he simply singling her out or did he just road blast his way, expecting people to bow down to him. She wondered whether he wanted an answer or not. He obviously expected her to agree, so what was the point in replying anyways.

"Is there a problem, Keya?" Kabier asked, obviously noticing the exasperated look she was giving him.

"No, should there be?" she countered back.

"Well, you haven't yet answered my question."

"I wasn't aware that I was expected to answer, I just thought I simply had to comply," she told him bluntly, looking at him defiantly.

Kabier couldn't believe the gall of this woman. It was the first time in his life that an employee had ever spoken to him like this, that too in the middle of a meeting. In fact, it was the first time that any employee had yelled at him. Kabier was encountering too many firsts with this woman.

Like, it had been the first time he had ever kissed someone he hardly knew, with such extreme intensity and passion.

He looked at her lips, set in a straight line and the memory of their last kiss returned to him, with full force.

Keya was staring at Kabier, challenge written in her eyes, when she saw, his eyes move to her lips. In an instant she realized that he was remembering, reliving the kiss that they had shared. He looked back at her, desire burning in his eyes, challenging her to break eye contact with him, victorious when he understood that she too was caught in the spell and could not look away. That she too was remembering. Every minute detail.

Both of them came back to reality when Munir, sensing the tension between the two, coughed deliberately in the back ground.

Kabier regained his composure faster than Keya and simply continued as if nothing had happened.

“I also would like that the three of us meet before every proposal is sent,” he said.

“So, are we all in agreement?” he asked. Munir answered with a yes and when Kabier turned to look at Keya, his eyebrows raised, she simply nodded.

“OK, then we can close this meeting for now and get back to other matters on hand,” Kabier announced with finality.

Keya left Kabier’s office in a daze. The visual encounter that they had shared had been electrifying. She hadn’t been able to look away from him. Somehow, she didn’t seem to be able to control herself where he was concerned. She was exhibiting extreme emotions around him, ranging from supreme anger to severe longing. She had to acknowledge that. One moment she was so angry with him that she could hit him and in the next instant she was remembering what it was like to be kissing him, longing to feel his lips on hers, his hands on her body. She was definitely attracted to him. She would be a fool to think otherwise.

But, at least now she knew where she stood with regards to him, so she could train herself to ignore his powerful charisma and attraction and concentrate only on work when she was around him. Yes, she had to do that. She always achieved what she set her mind on and she was going to achieve a decent working relationship with Kabier Sehgal. She would not get carried away and let her emotions run free, no matter how arrogantly he behaved, she told herself.



# Chapter 4

Kabier parked his brand new black Porsche four-wheel drive, in front of his cousin Sameer's house and beeped his horn once. He was looking forward to spending time with his cousins tonight. The three of them were extremely close. More than cousins, they were his confidants and his closest buddies. They usually caught up whenever they could, which was difficult because many a times they were all in different continents. Nevertheless they always kept in touch.

They had expected to meet up more often, now that they were all based in India, but that too was difficult due to their busy schedules. Tonight, Kabier thought warmly would be fun. A night out on town was just what he needed to get his mind off his busy work commitments.

Almost immediately the door opened and Sameer came towards him. Kabier, unclasped his seat belt and got out. The two men hugged each other and back-slapped.

"Nice wheels, Kabier!" Sameer exclaimed looking at his cousin's latest acquisition.

Kabier simply shrugged back and handed the keys to Sameer saying, "Try her out, she's a beauty."

Where's Rishi, by the way? He promised he'd join today," Kabier remarked, getting into the passenger seat and clicking his seat belt in place.

"Some problem, with one of his suppliers in Delhi," Sameer said revving the car engine. "He had to fly down there."

Kabier laughed. "On Friday night, hmmm, that must be some urgency; else Rishi is not the type to miss his weekend round of partying."

Sameer laughed, agreeing with him.

"So where to tonight?" Sameer asked.

"You decide. You are the expert in town."

"In that case, there is this new place in town which is making news. Let's go see what the buzz is about," said Sameer.

"Checking out the competition, huh?"

"As always," Sameer replied with a nod.

They drove to one of the latest night clubs in the city. Being a Friday night, the night spot was pretty crowded. They took up places at the bar,

ordered their drinks and silently observed the crowd. Being in the hotel business, Sameer looked around the newly opened place and shared his comments with Kabier. Kabier listened to him remarking on various things and let his eyes wander around the place. The long bar opened into a big dance floor and strewn on the corners were partly enclosed sitting areas which obviously needed a prior reservation as they all seemed to be occupied. The lighting was low with flashing lights as befit the place. All in all it was a decent night club, Kabier decided.

He let his eyes skim over the dance floor, observing the people groove to the music playing, when a couple dancing, right in the front of the floor, caught his attention. The girl had her back to the guy and her arms were spread in front of her, her whole body rhythmically moving to the beat of the song. The guy stood close behind her, had his palms on her hips and was moving completely in synch with her. There was nothing scandalous in their dance, as far as he could see; they just seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. He couldn't see the girl clearly as she was looking sideways and not facing him directly. But something about her looked familiar, so he continued looking at her. The DJ changed the track and the girl turned, whispering something in her partner's ear and continued to dance, now facing towards her partner.

Kabier recognized Keya a moment before Sameer said, "Hey isn't that one of Sheena's friends?"

"Yeah, that's Keya." Kabier's eyes did not leave her for one moment.

"No, not Keya, the other one," Sameer said.

Kabier looked in the direction where Sameer was staring and saw Raashi, dancing with someone, a bit of a distance away from Keya. He knew that Sheena wasn't with them as he knew that she and Rajiv had plans of their own tonight.

"Any idea who's the guy Raashi's dancing with?" Sameer asked him. Kabier looked back at Raashi's partner. "If I am not mistaken that's Aditya Wahi, from the Gemini group."

Seeing no comment forthcoming from Sameer, Kabier turned his attention back to Keya.

Kabier couldn't stop looking at her. She looked different. Her hair was left loose and fell in soft waves below her shoulders.

She was wearing a simple, strappy, short black dress that hugged her curves and accentuated her legs. Wow! She has great legs, Kabier thought

as he stared at her never ending long legs that ended in high heeled gold stilettos. A long gold, linked, chain was casually strewn around her neck and on her ears were big gold loops.

Her make up seemed to be expertly done and a dark red lipstick was applied on her lips, bringing out their fullness. He had only ever seen her in work attire and he had to admit that she looked stunning tonight.

Keya was having the time of her life. She was out with her friends at one of the hottest spots the city had to offer. The music was excellent and she was enjoying dancing. Her friends Rithwik and Aditya had called earlier in the day to make a plan for clubbing with Raashi and her. They had highly recommended the music this new place had to offer and she was glad she had agreed to come. She was feeling alive and free, better than she'd felt in days. She looked at her friends and smiled happily.

Raashi and she had met Rithwik and Aditya at a camping trip they had gone for during one of their college holidays. At that time, Sheena had been away and couldn't join them. The four of them had been grouped together during the trip and had ended up enjoying each others company immensely. They had formed a strong friendship ever since. On their return from the trip, the girls had introduced Sheena to their new friends. Although Sheena often partied with them, she never had been as close to the guys as Keya and Raashi.

The four of them, Keya, Raashi, Rithwik and Aditya often went out together and in the past had done lots of fun things together like taking dance classes, or going white water rafting. They were good friends and were each others back up or last minute dates as Keya called it. Several times when they couldn't come up with a date, they would naturally turn to Keya or Raashi to accompany them for their "must attend" social functions.

Looking at them now, Keya felt blessed. After the tough initial years she and her brother Akash had endured, they were each finding their niche in life. Keya had her work, which she loved and her friends to rely on. She missed her brother terribly at times, he was her only family. But he was happy and doing well and that's what mattered.

The music changed into a flighty dance number and Rithwik who was dancing with her pulled her into his arms and started moving them to a beat that the two of them were extremely familiar with.

Kabier watched surprised as the guy dancing with Keya, pulled her close into his arms and the two of them were soon moving forwards,

backwards, twisting and turning as per the steps of a very well-coordinated jive. Before he knew it, the entire crowd on the floor had stopped dancing and was cheering the two of them on.

Keya laughed as she matched her steps to Rithwik, who was an excellent dancer. Oh this was so much fun, she thought as Rithwik dipped her back, twirled her and then pulled her back into his arms. As the music finally stopped, Rithwik gave her a final twirl and dipped her low into his arms. The entire crowd roared with applause. Always the show man, she grinned as Rithwik gave a bow to the crowds.

“You are just too much,” she whispered to him.

He winked at her. “That I am. But you have to admit that was so much fun.”

She nodded at him as Raashi and Aditya came forward to join them and the four of them stepped off the dance floor.

“She’s Keya right?” Sameer asked. Kabier simply stared fixedly at Keya, not hearing the question.

Sameer asked again. “The one who just did that splendid dance, with Rithwik?”

“Who did you say, Keya was dancing with?” Kabier turned to ask him, simply to confirm that he had heard right.

“Rithwik Bali, the owner of Fortuna International. Don’t tell me you didn’t recognize him? Come on, he was your biggest competitor in school.”

Kabier looked at Keya’s partner once again. Sameer was right. That indeed was Rithwik Bali. He had been so captivated watching Keya that he hadn’t given her partner a second glance up until now.

Kabier had known Rithwik Bali since a long time; they were of the same age and background and had attended the same school, but while Kabier had gone to London to study, Rithwik had stayed back and studied in some of the best colleges in India. Their families moved in the same social circles and being heirs to huge business empires had brought them in close contact while attending business conferences or social do’s. The two of them were competitors in business now and had never really gotten along. When they were younger, they had engaged in several verbal spars, always competing with one another all the time. But over the years, they had sort of buried the hatchet, each man mutually respecting what the other one had achieved. But still, they definitely weren’t friends, more like acquaintances.

Kabier had felt a sharp pang, an unknown feeling, when the other guy

had had pulled Keya in his arms. Watching Keya dance with such abandon with her partner had intensified this reaction in him. And finally, his mood had turned extremely sour, when the dance had ended with Keya dipped so low into her partner's arms. Realizing that her partner was none other than his one-time nemesis Rithwik Bali, aggravated him even more. He saw Keya nodding to something Rithwik was telling her and then both the guys moved off in another direction leaving the girls alone.

"Sheena's cousin Sameer is here, at the bar," Raashi told Keya.

Keya had her back to the bar and before she could as much as turn her head, Raashi said quickly, "And Kabier is here with him."

"What?" Keya asked taken aback. She hadn't expected to bump into Kabier here of all places; and after their last encounter in his office she didn't want to meet him so soon, at least not until she had trained her body and mind into not reacting to him.

"Come on, let's go and meet them," Raashi told her.

"No, I don't want to," Keya said, knowing she was being childish.

"Keya, I've already acknowledged them. We can't just pretend they're not here. So, stop behaving difficult and let's go," Raashi told her. Reluctantly, Keya let Raashi hold her hand and lead her towards the bar, where she could see Kabier standing, watching them approach.

Kabier had seen the exchange between the girls. He had seen how unwillingly Keya was allowing her friend to lead her towards where Sameer and he were standing at the bar.

Sameer came forward to greet the two girls. The first thing he said was, "Keya, that dance was simply amazing."

Keya smiled at him and murmured thanks and turned to look at Kabier who was silently sipping his drink, his eyes on her.

"Hello Kabier," she said softly.

He replied with a nod of his head.

Raashi asked Sameer about his brother and the two of them continued to talk oblivious to the fact the Keya and Kabier were silently glaring, appraising one another.

She had only ever seen him in the formal suits he wore to work and now seeing him dressed casually in well fitted dark denims, stretched taut over his long legs and an equally well-fitted black shirt that showed off his broad chest to the fullest, took her breath away. His shirt sleeves were folded back, giving his appearance a casual grace. The effect was devastating.

Up close she looked even better, Kabier thought. Her dress was fitted very well indeed, giving a slight hint of cleavage when she ran her hand through her hair, like she was doing right now. Her hair was beautiful and dark and his mind could easily picture her hair fanned out on a white pillow. He shook his head to get back to the present.

He saw that her lips were set into a defiant line, one he was now beginning to recognize. He knew she was uncomfortable around him, especially after their last meeting. Hell, he was uncomfortable around her. She was dangerous to his mental health. She was sharp, intelligent, and beautiful, he thought to himself. Not to mention deceptive, dishonest and cunning, the rational part of his mind told him. But Kabier had to accept that in spite of all the evidence he had against her, in spite of the fact that she maybe discreetly having an affair with his grandfather, he was attracted to her. No matter how vehemently he denied it, he knew he wanted her. His body wanted her like no other woman he had come across before.

Sameer turned to Keya, including her in the conversation. "The twins mentioned to me that you caught up with them on your last trip to London."

"Yes, I did actually," Keya replied remembering the girls fondly. At twenty one, Shauna and Rhea were a good nine years younger than Kabier and Sameer, who were born just months apart. Sheena like Keya and Raashi was twenty seven and Rishi was a year older to them. The twins were quite a handful and Keya knew that Kabier and his cousins were having a tough time controlling them. Truth be told they were wild. But Keya liked them a lot. Being the youngest in the family, they were always up to mischief and Keya felt that most of their behavior was due to the fact that they were surrounded by possessive, dominant older males who had preset notions on how they should lead their lives.

"How are they doing? I haven't heard about any of their latest escapades from Sheena in a long time," Keya asked Sameer jokingly.

"They're fine, concentrating on their studies now. I've had enough of their devil-may care attitude towards life. Every time I spoke to them or met them, they were dating someone new, going off for a party somewhere, or planning a holiday. Or worse, spending way too much money on clothes and accessories they really didn't need," Sameer said exasperatedly. "The way they flaunt their wealth, it is just a matter of time before some lunatic takes advantage of them." Keya watched as Sameer shook his head in frustration.

"Honestly I think they are too smart to let that happen," Raashi said.

“Well, we are not going to wait around to test that so we have reduced their allowance and employed bodyguards to protect them,” Sameer said.

“What?” Keya said shocked and turned to look at Raashi who had the same look of disbelief on her face.

“They’re clearly incapable of taking care of themselves so someone has to step in and set the ground rules and ensure that they don’t make a mess of their lives,” Kabier said, speaking for the first time since she met him.

“Well, I find them extremely intelligent, with a firm head on their shoulders. Most likely, they just rebel to annoy you,” Keya told him firmly.

“Oh! And how much time have you spent with them to really understand them?” Kabier asked rudely.

“Enough to understand that the more you try and control them, make them follow your rules, the more they’ll rebel and go out of their way to break them,” Keya retorted back in the same tone.

Before Kabier could get another word through, he saw Rithwik coming to stand besides Keya.

“Hi guys. Kabier, Sameer,” he said acknowledging the two men.

The men shook hands.

“You seemed to be enjoying yourself back there,” Kabier told Rithwik, nodding towards the dance floor.

“But of course. That was fun wasn’t it Keya?” Not waiting for Keya to respond Rithwik continued, “Keya and I have been dancing together for years. That’s why it was so spectacular.”

Rithwik put his arm around Keya’s waist, pulling her close to him. “And besides Keya is such a beautiful dancer, that I couldn’t resist having her in my arms again,” he finished off and turned to smile tenderly into Keya’s eyes.

What the hell was Rithwik up to? Keya wondered. He was positively behaving like they were an item, which was most definitely not the case. Before she could try and clear the air, Rithwik said, “There are some friends I’d like these lovely ladies to meet, so if you’ll excuse us...”

He nodded to the two men and without taking his arm off Keya propelled her and Raashi towards the further end of the bar, slightly away from where Kabier and Sameer were standing.

Only when they had reached where Aditya was waiting there for them, talking to two guys and another girl, that Rithwik got his arm off Keya. After the introductions were made Keya pulled Rithwik slightly aside and asked

him severely, "What in the world were you trying to prove out there?"

"Me, what did I do?" he asked innocently, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

She narrowed her eyes. "Rithwik Bali, you know very well, that there is nothing going on between the two of us, so why did you try and give the impression that we are together?"

Rithwik looked serious now. "I saw how Kabier was staring at you when you went up to him and his cousin. Keya, the guy definitely has the hots for you. And from the way I saw you returning his stare, makes me wonder if the feeling is mutual. I just thought that if he thinks you're with me, he'll leave you alone. He does have quite a reputation with women, which I am sure you are well aware of."

She instantly warmed up at his concern.

"Oh Rithwik! That's so sweet, but I can take care of myself and honestly, I am way, way out of Kabier's league."

"But..."

Keya cut him off. "No, seriously, I think you're mistaken. It's the first time we've met each other outside work, so I think we were both just taken aback to meet in a different environment."

"Well, if that's what it is, then fine. But trust me, don't fall for him. You'll just get your heart broken".

Keya kissed his cheek and winked at him and said laughingly, "But I'll have you to help me mend my heart then. Won't I?"

Rithwik smiled, clearly not convinced but simply let the topic be and returned with her to join the group, where Aditya was ordering drinks for everyone.

Keya declined the offer and proceeded to sip just water. Aditya finally said, "I know, let's have a round of tequila shots."

"Swell idea," said Rithwik.

"Cool," said some of the others in the group.

Keya looked at them all and rolled her eyes. "Bad idea Aditya! I am not falling for this. You start with one, and before you know it, we're ordering the next round and then the next. No way, not me."

"Boo Keya, don't be a spoil sport," Aditya said.

"Come on," said Raashi "only one, at least."

Aditya simply went ahead, despite her severe protestations, and ordered all of them a round of tequila shots. He lined all the glasses on the



bar's platform and put a wee bit of salt on the back of each of their hands and handed each of them lemon slices. Aditya began counting and on count of three, all of them sucked the salt from the back of their hands, drank up the entire tequila shot in one go and then sucked on each of their lemon slice.

Keya felt the shot burn right down her throat till it reached her stomach and then she felt it burning right back up. Ugh! She was disgusted. She never enjoyed tequila. But the others were having none of it. They were laughing and cheering in delight and very promptly as she had predicted ordered the next round.

"Do you know how many shots they're down?" Sameer asked Kabier in disbelief nodding towards Raashi and Keya's group.

"This is their third one," commented Kabier wryly, his eyes never having strayed from Keya's side ever since she had left with Rithwik. He hadn't missed their exchange either and was disgusted to see Keya kiss Rithwik. It was a chaste kiss but it still put him off. He also hadn't missed the way Rithwik had possessively wound his arm around her, in front of him, clearly marking his territory. Did his grandfather know of her relationship with Rithwik Bali? Was she in a relationship with Rithwik Bali or was it one of those casual, raunchy affairs that one so frequently heard of. Rithwik was nobody's fool, he knew that. The man was a sharp and astute businessman. His company Fortuna International was the one, Sehgal Systems had lost the first contract to. But using a woman to get sensitive information from a rival company, could he actually resort to that?

Kabier was baffled, never ever before had a woman muddled his brain in anyway. He speared his hand through his hair and watched Keya's group order their fourth tequila shot of the night.

"She's wild isn't she?" Sameer said still looking at the group.

"Seriously, looking at Keya no one would think that," Kabier responded.

"I am talking about Raashi. Keya seems to be the sanest one in that group tonight. Didn't you see? After the first shot she downed, every time the rest of them drank, she quietly dumped the entire shot into the glass next to her. There they go again. Watch!"

Sameer was right, Kabier watched as she raised her glass and while everyone else drank, she quietly emptied her tequila into a glass next to her. Then she simply sucked on the lime as was customary and joined in all their laughter and delight. She was definitely very sly, he thought. The group

seemed to have had enough to drink and they headed to the dance floor, most of them positively less stable on their feet after having imbibed too much to drink.

“I’ve had enough for one night,” Sameer commented dryly.

“Yeah, me too,” Kabier replied. “Let’s head back.”

And with a last glance at the two girls, the cousins exited.

Back in the car Sameer seemed thoughtful. Finally he said, “Keya’s right you know.”

“About what?” Kabier said wondering what Sameer was talking about.

“The twins! Sometimes I do feel that maybe they are rebelling just to prove that we can’t run their lives.”

“That maybe so, but as of now they have not done one thing to prove to us that they are responsible enough.”

“I agree with you, but I think Keya’s right as well,” Sameer said sensibly. “Though, at this point I am not willing to take any risks concerning them either. So let us wait and observe.”

The sleek car moved like a panther in the dark night. It was late and there was hardly any traffic on the roads. The car stopped in front of an apartment block in an extremely fashionable neighborhood. The driver, a beautiful woman in her late twenties was staring out into the night thoughtfully. She looked at the apartment block and thought of the man waiting there for her. She knew he had been expecting her to arrive hours earlier. She normally met him here at his apartment or in his farmhouse on the outskirts of the city. She had access to both because of her connection to him.

But being a Friday night, she had decided to keep him waiting. She went to him like she did on most weekends, at least when she was not travelling for work. She had started entrapping him in her web, using her body as a device to attract him, some three years back. Although, initially hesitant, he had succumbed to her abundant charms. After all, he was one of the key people of Sehgal Systems and she knew that he could get her the information she needed.

It had taken time, but finally, she had him where she wanted him, begging for her to come to him, wanting to do anything to please her. She smiled to herself. She had him hooked.

Her discreet alliance with such an important person in Sehgal Systems had given her the privilege to be in easy access to whatever information she

wanted and she had used the sources well for herself. She had created the life she had always wanted and could never have earlier. She quietly left the car and entered the building.

# Chapter 5

Keya pored over the morning papers in her office. The headlines screamed the news that Janak Sehgal had handed over the helm of his entire business to his first born grandson, Kabier, who was now Managing Director of Sehgal Group. Though Janak was still chairman, he had made it obvious that he would not be the one taking the decisions henceforth. The paper also showed a picture of Kabier. He looked striking even though he wasn't smiling. But there was a sharp confidence in him that even the camera couldn't hide. Keya had been present yesterday when the press conference had been called and Janak had announced the news to the media. She had watched in awe as Kabier had expertly answered all the questions that the waiting journalists had posed, smartly avoiding those that he didn't want to reply to. That hadn't stopped her from reading the news item in the papers again and ogling at his picture and thinking about him. She rolled her eyes. This day dreaming wasn't going to get her anywhere. She had enough problems with him as it is.

Work was so much more hectic now that he was around, Keya thought. It was like he expected a certain standard and she was not meeting it, no matter how hard she tried. He was questioning her actions and decisions whenever he could and many times in public. And in private he was outright rude to her. Worse was that a few days ago, a simple point of contention between them had erupted into a full blown war of words. Although Keya had proved her point in the end, it was annoying and taxing to be on the hot seat all the time. It seemed as though he was questioning her motives towards the company. Well, she wasn't the type to sit silent and let him walk over her. When she felt something she just said it. That's just the way she was.

But Keya had to grudgingly admit that he was bringing about subtle changes in the organization and they seemed to be working. And he had been right when he had pointed out certain aspects in her style of working that could be improved on. Keya was so frustrated by his rude attitude that she almost always questioned his motives and accepted his dictates with lots of vocal reservation. This behavior was so not her. She normally always accepted advice very easily, but coming from Kabier, nothing was going down well with her. And this constant state of battle between them was

driving her crazy. No matter how hard she tried, she hadn't been able to establish some kind of decent work relationship between them.

Keya went to the restroom to wash her face and calm herself. She was mentally exhausted by all the pressure. She ran the faucet and splashed water on her face.

"Well, well! Look who's feeling all hot and flustered," came a sarcastic comment from behind her.

Keya looked up into the mirror to see Trisha standing a bit of distance behind her, her arms folded. Keya observed her for a second; Trisha Mehta, a senior project manager of Sehgal Systems and someone who considered Keya as her arch rival.

Trisha was almost always dressed like she was on the runway of a fashion show. Thinking back, she couldn't recall Trisha as ever not being perfectly dressed. While Keya mostly preferred trousers and shirts to work, Trisha on the other hand almost always wore a formal short skirt with a shirt. In fact, even at the present moment she was similarly attired, in a black skirt and bright red shirt. By the middle of each day, Keya's hair started tumbling out of the top knot and curling around her face and she usually never bothered much with her hair or her make up at work. Trisha on the other hand always looked perfectly made up, with not a single hair, ever, out of place. Now if only she had the height for it and she could have carried the model look perfectly, Keya thought nastily. But what Trisha lacked in height she made up for with her curvaceous figure and attitude. She was supremely confident of herself and super condescending to Keya.

Keya walked to the napkin dispenser and pulled out a napkin and made a show of patting her face dry before replying, "And hello to you too, Trisha."

She knew that as usual Trisha was trying to rile her and she was not going to fall for it. She was already having a rough day and she was not going to let Trisha worsen it further.

"I believe the new boss is giving you a lot of trouble," Trisha said with a hint of smile on her lips.

"Not too much," Keya said lightly.

"From what I hear, he is questioning everything you say or do."

From where did this woman get such information? Of course Kabier and she had one or two arguments in the middle of a meeting, but Keya was known to speak her mind, so she never imagined it would be perceived this

way by others. Keya sighed quietly. Trisha was not everyone else. She would do or say the most annoying things to bother Keya.

Trisha was looking at her, waiting for her to answer. Keya lifted her chin and replied confidently.

“Then I think that you have heard wrong.”

“It’s good actually,” Trisha continued as if Keya hadn’t said anything at all, “Finally someone is seeing things in the right perspective.”

“Which would be what?” Keya asked her sweetly.

“That someone with your attitude doesn’t deserve to be in the position that you are in.”

“Well, that has been your opinion since the day I got this position; the position you so obviously wanted. So how does your perspective matter to me anyway? I deserved this position when I got it and I still do. And nothing you say can or will change that.”

“Don’t be too sure of that, Keya. Kabier is not Janak, who you have a special connection with. He’s more astute than most and he will replace you if he doesn’t find you fit for the position.”

“You seem to have understood him pretty well, considering that he has only just returned to the country.”

“I have known Kabier since high school. In fact we were very close at one time ...,” Trisha paused, stared dreamily into space, to achieve the desired effect and then continued, “And now that he is back, obviously we’re getting re-acquainted. So contrary to what you may think, I do understand him pretty well and since we are friends, he does listen to me.”

Keya understood the warning for what it was. Trisha was hinting at her closeness to Kabier and hence her ability to influence him against her.

“Good for you, Trisha. Finally you have someone who may just listen to you and your opinion.” Keya turned and walked out of the rest room and went to her office.

Trisha had been competing with her ever since Keya had joined Sehgal Systems. The other girl was slightly older than Keya and had already been with the company for a while when she had joined. Trisha had immensely disliked the fact that Keya had direct access to Janak and that he was training Keya himself. She had always been resentful towards Keya. When Keya was proclaimed the Chief Technology Head, it had directly catapulted her to a senior management position. This had not gone down well with Trisha at all, as this was a position that she had wanted for herself. To

make things worse, Trisha was indirectly reporting to Keya.

Her attitude towards Keya had deteriorated even further. She would look for opportunities to create complications for her at work and during several malicious conversations would hint that Keya had got the position because of Janak. But so far Keya had never heard her being so openly spiteful. Up to now, Keya had tolerated her and taken all she said with a pinch of salt.

Trisha, obviously, was under the impression that the tables were turning in her favor now that Kabier was in control. She apparently felt she had some influence where he was concerned.

And if she had been close to him once, then who knew, she was quite capable of starting something with him again. Somehow the thought of Kabier and Trisha together was irritating her no end.

Shaking her head to free herself of these thoughts, she concentrated on her next meeting which was starting in ten minutes.

At the end of the next hour her stress levels had shot up by several degrees. There seemed to be some problem with the Austrian hospital contract. Suddenly, out of nowhere Eclipse had come into the picture and Sehgal Systems had a competitor now for this contract.

This was just not possible, Keya thought. How could Eclipse offer their kind of rates? The head of the hospital chain had given her till the end of day to come up with a better proposal or they would consider going to Eclipse.

Now she had to go back to Kabier and re-discuss the prices they had offered. She rubbed her forehead with her hand and re-read the email that she had promptly received at the end of the phone meeting from the hospital head. The email reiterated what had been discussed on the phone. Keya sighed and forwarded the email to Kabier, asking him for a time when she could come and discuss this with him.

In ten minutes she got a reply from him saying that he would go through it and decide for himself and if he didn't find it worth their while he would just let the contract go.

Kabier re-read the email that Keya had forwarded to him and frowned at the screen. This was pretty disturbing. He had been told very clearly by both Keya and her boss Munir, that the Austrian contract was a done deal. That none of their competitors could offer better rates than they had. So, how was it possible that Eclipse was suddenly competing with them? Unless, he

thought angrily, Keya had sold out to Eclipse again. He had to do something. He picked up his phone and called and spoke to the Austrian head himself and sat back satisfied.

“Kabier, Hi!” Trisha stopped the closing elevator door with her hand and entered the lift, standing next to Kabier, who was alone in the compartment.

“Hey Trisha! How are you?” Kabier asked her.

“Am good! Hey we’ve been planning to catch up outside office for a while now. When do you think you can get time off your busy schedule to have dinner with me?” Trisha asked him.

Kabier laughed. “Soon, I hope. It’s just that I am totally tied up with a million things at the moment, so I spend most of my evenings at home, working!”

The lift opened on Trisha’s floor and she got out and held her hand to the closing door saying, “Then let’s meet for lunch today, in one of the restaurants on the campus.”

“Sure. I’ll see you at one. Let’s meet in my office.” Kabier watched the door shut on her. He had known Trisha for years and though they’d hardly been in touch, it would be good catching up with her now that he was back. He really needed to unwind; he had been working so hard for the past few days that he hadn’t had time for anyone or anything. Trisha would be good to hang out with. She was a school friend and she seemed to be in touch with lots of his old friends and it would be great reconnecting with all of them. He had lost touch with many of them ever since he left for London, straight after school, to complete his higher education. And since he was hardly in India after that, he hadn’t been able to connect with most of his old friends. He really needed to take time off from work and get out more often.

Keya stared at her laptop screen, unable to make any sense of the numbers in front of her. Her head hurt and she was feeling flustered. This report had to go out to Kabier in an hour and so far she was unable to concentrate on it. There were too many things that Kabier had asked her to do and so far she wasn’t satisfied with even one of the reports that she had made for him. It was going to be a long day ahead and she took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes. She called Janak’s assistant to check if he was there and decided to go meet him. She needed his advice on certain reports that she was preparing and he could cheer her up on the most rotten of days.



She entered his office and he looked up at her and smiled. “Hey Keya!”

“Hi Janak, you have some time, or should I come by later?” Keya asked him.

“I always have time for you. So, what’s going on?”

Keya paced the floor of his office and said, “Bad day, too many hitches. And the way I see it, I am going to be here till midnight just to complete the reports that Kabier needs.”

She shook her head. “Never mind that. I came because I need your help in certain matters.” She went on to explain her issues with the matters she was handling, in brief. As usual he let her talk, asked her a few pointed questions and finally helped her get the answers she was looking for.

“Thanks Janak, I don’t know what I’d do without you,” Keya said with a slight smile.

“You know you can always come to me.”

“I know, I know. I am just so mentally exhausted today and to add to that Kabier is quite a tough task master.”

“Is he giving you a hard time?” Janak asked her coming to stand in front of her.

“Nothing I can’t manage so far.”

“You sure?”

“Of course. Though right now I think I need to go for a long holiday. I need some mental peace which I cannot get while at work.”

Janak smiled at her. She really must be exhausted, he thought. He knew she loved her work here and even on a holiday she’d still be checking her emails to ensure that everything was running smoothly in her absence. That was just the way she was. Always feeling responsible for everything she was in control of.

“Come here, you.” And he held his arms wide.

Keya went to him and let him hug her. She rested her head against his chest and stayed like that for a while, letting, his warmth and energy seep through her tired senses. He was one of the few people who made her feel cherished and she treasured her bond with him.

Trisha met Kabier in his office and as they were leaving Kabier said, “I just need to talk to my grandfather for a minute.”

The two of them walked across to Janak’s office. Since it was lunch time, Janak’s assistant was nowhere to be seen. Without knocking Kabier

entered the office and stood rooted at the door. He couldn't believe his eyes. His grandfather and Keya were locked in an embrace.

He could see Keya, her eyes shut, head resting on his grandfather's chest, her arms wound around his back and his hands were on her waist, holding her. Kabier felt like he had been punched in the gut. They hadn't even realized that he had entered the room.

Trisha peered from behind Kabier and smiled to herself, seeing the position that Keya and Janak were in. This was interesting she thought.

Without a word Kabier marched out of the office, Trisha following him. She could see the cold fury coming out from him in waves. They took the elevator down and walked quietly to one of the restaurants in the premises. Once they were seated she asked him, "Kabier, are you alright?"

"I am fine," he told her coldly.

"You don't seem OK," Trisha said.

Kabier kept quiet. Finally, taking a deep breath he said, "Let's order some food."

"You do know that they have been having an affair since quite a while, right?" Trisha said after they placed their orders.

"How do you know that?" Kabier countered back.

"Everyone in the company knows, why do you think Keya is in the position that she is in today?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Kabier said.

"Well, I believe that when there is some talk going on there will at least be some truth to it, else why would people talk at all, isn't it?"

Kabier didn't answer that. Instead he changed the subject completely and didn't bring it up again during the course of the lunch.

But he was very affected by what he had seen and what he had heard from Trisha. Till now there had been some speculation on his part whether what the agency had reported was true or not, but now seeing them together was proof. Besides, the worst was knowing that he himself was attracted to her; the very same woman who was involved with his grandfather. It was disgusting to even consider. He mentally cursed himself.

"Finally! I can't believe it. I finally have some good luck," Keya said to herself aloud later in the evening. She was working late as she had been doing since the past few days and this email had finally lifted her spirits.

She re-read the email from the Austrian head that informed her that they had awarded their hospital contract to Sehgal Systems and that they

wanted the contract to be signed and sealed in two days. They also wanted Keya to be present for the following round of discussions after the contract was signed. Wow! They had actually won it. Since she hadn't heard from Kabier about this contract, she had assumed that they were going to let it go. But somehow it seemed that Eclipse was no longer in contention and the contract had come to them. This was excellent news for the company. It would surely strengthen their foothold in the European healthcare segment.

The mail didn't say why they had finally chosen them over Eclipse even though the last time they had said that Sehgal Systems prices were higher. But never mind, she would find out when she went to sign the deal. She happily forwarded the email to Kabier, Munir and to Janak. Her hard work seemed to have paid off.

## Chapter 6

Keya entered Janak's private jet and greeted the waiting staff with a warm familiarity. She had on several occasions used this jet for her business travels with Janak. In fact, on one or two occasions like this one, when it was on short notice that she had to travel, Janak had let her use the jet by herself, instead of taking a commercial flight. She had been ever so apprehensive when she had realized that Kabier would be traveling with her to sign the contract. But then luck had been on her side and she had got an email from him yesterday, saying that he wouldn't be able to attend and she had relaxed. She took her time to stand and talk to the attending staff; speaking to them in a friendly and easy manner and they responded to her similarly.

Kabier watched Keya board the flight from the window on his side. Realizing at the last moment that he could make it for the meeting, he had asked his assistant to get the jet ready for him. He had rushed home, packed a few essentials and rushed to the airport. It was not going to be a long trip, just two days max, if all went well.

When he had boarded the flight, he was surprised that the pilot had not taken off, although he had boarded more than half an hour ago. On enquiring he had been told that they were waiting for Keya. That piece of information had literally shocked him.

These jets were used mainly by the family and he had never heard of an employee use them before, unless they were accompanying someone on business. Since Keya didn't know that he was attending the meeting along with her in Vienna, he had assumed that she would have taken the early morning commercial flight out to Vienna. Hence it was a huge surprise that she was taking the private jet; in fact, the jet had been ready for her use even before he had decided to go!

It bothered him no end that he had to wait for her to arrive for the aircraft to takeoff. She really had a strong connection with his grandfather to command such luxuries. He saw her enter the flight and talk with ease to the waiting staff who apparently knew her pretty well, which showed that she had been on board this jet on several occasions in the past. She turned then to walk down the aisle and saw him and was momentarily stunned; she certainly had not expected to see him here.

Keya lost her composure for a few moments when she saw Kabier sitting in one of the luxurious reclining seats of the jet, all belted up and waiting for takeoff. Her eyes widened in disbelief and her heart sped. She had never expected to see him here and it was obvious that he wasn't too happy to see her either. She schooled her expression and with as much calm as she could muster said, "Hi! So, it seems you could finally make it."

"Yes I could," Kabier replied, all the while watching her as she took a seat on the plane, which was at a distance from his. She was dressed in casual denims and a white fitted V necked tee. Her hair was left loose to flow down her shoulders and back.

Within moments, the flight took off.

The silence was awkward for Keya. She knew that they didn't see eye to eye at work, but if they were going to sign a major deal together, they would need to solve some of their differences, else it would be obvious to everyone there that they didn't get along. It was an hour into the flight and they still hadn't spoken. She turned to look at Kabier who was shuffling through the pages of a business magazine.

Taking a deep breath she tried to break the ice between them. "Since you are going to be there, we need to discuss a couple of things before the meeting tomorrow."

Kabier shut the magazine and turned to face her. "Tell me," he said.

Keya gave him a detailed description of the company, who they were going to meet and what their worries and concerns were regarding the contract. Kabier asked her a couple of questions of his own but let her do most of the talking. There was an uncomfortable silence when she finished and Kabier just turned back and started reading the magazine once again.

"What is your problem?" she asked, thoroughly exasperated with him and then regretted it almost immediately. Keya cursed her run-away mouth. Sometimes the fact that she always spoke her mind was just not good.

"Excuse me," Kabier said, looking at her again.

"I mean seriously, what have I done to deserve your rudeness all the time?"

"I don't believe we have spoken much today, for you to accuse me of that," Kabier replied.

"I am not talking about right now; it's the way you have been behaving with me, ever since the first time we met."

Kabier didn't bother replying. What could he say? At the moment, he

could not accuse her of her involvement with his grandfather or the fact that he thought she was secretly passing confidential information to his competitors.

“Come on, I deserve an answer to that one,” Keya said, frustrated by his silence.

“I think you have a very vivid imagination,” was his only response.

“And I think you are just evading the question. But fine, have it your way. We can continue to be like this with each other and hope for both our sakes that no one in the meeting notices.” Keya continued and said sweetly, “After all we wouldn’t want people to know tomorrow that the big boss is having a problem with one of his employees, especially someone he has come to sign the contract with, would we?”

Saying that Keya got up and went to the small pantry at the back of the plane where she spent the next hour chatting easily with the crew on board.

This woman was impossible, Kabier thought. She was so damn outspoken. As if she didn’t care what she was saying and to whom she was saying it to. Well, having the connection she did with his grandfather, probably made it easier for her to behave in that manner.

She had disappeared somewhere in the back of the plane and hadn’t returned to her seat for more than an hour. When she returned she deliberately ignored him, plucked out a book from her bag and dug her nose in it for most of the journey. It was a racy action novel, one which he had read himself.

Keya tried to read, but it was difficult. She was sitting just across from Kabier and could see him going over some reports on his laptop. Just watching him was muddling her brain and she could not concentrate on the book in front of her. Finally she shut the book, turned her face away from him and almost immediately drifted off to sleep.

The crew came and served him a small meal and Keya still slept on. When he turned to look at her, they just smiled and told him that she had eaten earlier.

Finishing his meal, he looked in her direction. Keya was sleeping peacefully, a loose long curl on her cheek. She looked delectable in the white tee that hugged her curves sinfully. Damn, she really was attractive as hell. Who could ever imagine that this lovely a face could hide a deceitful person behind it, he thought. He dragged his eyes away from her and tried to concentrate on his reports.

It was late in the night when they finally landed in Vienna. A car was waiting to pick them up for the airport. The only conversation that they had, since the earlier altercation, was when Kabier enquired which hotel she would be staying at. He had not been overly surprised to learn that it was the same hotel he was booked in.

They parted at the reception of the hotel and agreed to meet the next morning in the lobby, after breakfast, so they could attend the meeting together.

The meeting had gone off very well, Keya thought. Kabier was extremely good at what he did and he had apparently impressed the management of this very important hospital chain. It was late evening now. Thankfully the two of them had set their differences aside for the day and together had answered all the questions that the various board members had laid before them. It was a huge success.

As the meeting closed and everyone got up to leave, the head of the chain came towards Keya. He congratulated her and mentioned that the final rate Kabier had offered during their telephonic conversation was really good. He further stated that since he had always wanted to work with them he was glad that they could come to an agreement. He then went on to discuss the new rates in detail with Keya. Feeling a little lost, Keya managed to answer some of his queries. As soon as he left, she pulled out the contract documents from her folder- the same contract that had been signed earlier in the day by Kabier - and skimmed through them to the section where the rates were mentioned.

Since it was standard procedure she had not gone through every page that their lawyers had drawn out. She saw that the rates had indeed been reduced by ten per cent from the original offer that she had made. It was only then that it dawned on her that Kabier had changed the rates without informing her and he had even instructed the lawyers to make the necessary changes in the contract.

This was her project and she had worked extremely hard for it. She didn't deserve this kind of treatment from him. Thankfully, she hadn't been asked to discuss the rates in detail, by anyone, else she surely would have made a fool of herself. As far as she was concerned, this was simply not acceptable. Why did Kabier have to do things that made her so furious with him?

She had initially hoped that today's success would improve their sour relationship, but now she was not sure whether it could ever be improved, especially after she gave him a piece of her mind.

"You changed the rates after I sent you the email didn't you?" Keya asked him when they were finally alone in the car that was taking them back to the hotel.

Thrilled and on a high that the meeting had been so fantastic, Kabier turned to look at Keya who looked extremely angry right now. Her eyes which were focused on him were clouded with fury.

His expression turning somber, he very casually said, "Yes, I did."

"And you didn't think it important for me to know about this? This was my project. I have worked hard for months on it. If you changed the rates, then the least you could have done was to inform me."

"At that time I was just too busy," Kabier told her getting out of the car as it stopped in front of the hotel lobby.

Keya followed him into the hotel and as they stepped into the elevator asked sarcastically, "Too busy?"

Keya was furious and shaking her head angrily, said, "What if any of them had asked me about the rates? I would have looked like a total fool in front of the entire management of the hospital. Can you imagine how embarrassing it would have been?"

Before he could answer she said, "No wait, why would you even care? You're the all-important boss of Sehgal Systems, whose time is so much more important than everyone else's that he couldn't even bother to tell me such a relevant detail. You're simply impossible and I hate your autocratic style of working." Saying so Keya exited from the elevator and walked quickly to her room.

Oh the cheek of that woman! She was just impossible and rude and thought she could speak to him however she wanted. Kabier quickly followed her down the hallway. Keya knew exactly how to spark his temper and now he was brimming with fury. As usual she managed to get the worst out of him. He should have informed her about the change in the rates, especially after they had won the contract. However, he had been furious with her ever since he had seen her in his grandfather's embrace that he hadn't given anything else a thought. In any case nothing major had happened, so he couldn't understand why she was making such a big deal about the whole thing.



“Just wait one moment, I told you that I will decide what to do about this contract and I did. I wasn’t sure that we’d be able to win the contract even with the new rates. And you, “Miss I need to Know Everything”, didn’t even bother to follow it up with me and check if anything was done regarding the quotation or not, did you?”

Opening the door to her room Keya entered and said, “Right! So now it’s my fault. Why can’t you accept that keeping me out was wrong on your part?”

“And why can’t you accept that you should have checked with me?” Kabier countered back, entering her room behind her.

“You were wrong and you just don’t get it,” Keya said putting her hands on her hips. “You have to care enough about people to understand such things, which you apparently don’t. I seriously wonder what Janak was thinking when he handed over the reins to you. You clearly can’t handle this position, not to mention the responsibility that goes with it,” Keya remarked flippantly.

Kabier glared back at her and Keya realized that she had gone a bit too far with her last remark. It was completely uncalled for. She hadn’t actually checked with him, if he had done anything with the deal, assuming that he would tell her if he had.

But damn if she was going to apologize to him. So she put her chin up and watched Kabier stand in front of her, his hands folded on his chest, white hot fury emanating in waves around him.

“You better take that last comment back or...”

Keya cut him short and said sarcastically, “Or what? You’ll fire me? You’re very welcome to do so.” Keya knew she was playing with fire. But she was past caring now. Kabier Sehgal was an arrogant, push over, who thought the world moved at the click of his fingers and Keya was not letting him bog her down with his rude behavior and towering presence.

“No,” he said grimly. “You and I both know that’s not the solution, so I have something better in my mind,” he told her angrily.

Kabier looked down at Keya, right into her eyes and slowly started walking towards her. With each step he took forward, Keya took a step back until she was finally trapped between the wall at her back and Kabier who stood right in front of her glowering with rage.

Before she knew it, Kabier had caught her face in both his hands and was kissing her forcefully.

Kabier pushed his body against Keya, and pushed her flat against the wall. He plundered her soft mouth savagely. The kiss was hard; he wanted her to submit to him completely. It was a kiss meant to punish, to make her bend to his will; to make her accept who was in charge here. It was meant to teach her a lesson. She could not get away with her audacity and her caustic comments.

Keya literally fought him tooth and nail. She was pounding her fists against his chest and on his arms, trying to free herself. But he was way too tough for her. She was backed against the wall, his heavy weight on her. She was trapped.

Kabier tried to force her, to kiss her to submission but she was fighting him all the way. Any other woman would have been subjugated by now. But, not Keya! She was a wild cat. So, he tried a different approach. He slackened his hold on her face and changed the tenor of the kiss. He started kissing her gently and softly, giving her small pecks on the lips, flicking his tongue slowly and deliberately on her lips and then repeating it again and again. She stopped fighting him and stood still. And then she gasped softly.

And just like that his anger was gone. Instead he longed for her to respond to him, to please his already out of control senses by giving in to him.

Keya was shocked by the change in him. Suddenly he was kissing her to entice, not forcing her like earlier, but slowly teasing her senses. His lips and tongue were moving all over her mouth, gently forcing her to open her lips to him.

As he increased the subtle intensity of the kiss, she parted her lips slightly and taking advantage he plunged his tongue deep inside her mouth and tasted her. He kissed her long and deep. With soft kisses and an even slower movement of his tongue inside her mouth he was tempting her to respond to him. He moved his hands from her face, certain now that she wasn't going to fight and very slowly traced her curves. He let his hands caress the sides of her face and then moved slowly, leisurely down the column of her throat. He feathered light kisses on her face and down her throat, everywhere that he had touched with his hands and then returned his lips to her mouth, hungry for her reaction, for her to join him in this maddening ecstasy.

Keya felt like she was drowning in an emotion totally foreign to her, a longing was awakening inside her. Sanity no longer prevailed. She no longer

cared. All she wanted was more of him. Without thinking of the consequences, she put her arms around him and kissed him back.

Kabier was thrilled. It was as if, he had finally been delivered the one thing that he had been waiting for. Finally, she was succumbing to him, kissing him back with equal ardor and intensity. His response to her was feral and unrestrained.

Keya thought she would go mad with all the sensations she was feeling. It was like her wild side, previously dormant, was awakened by him. His hands were heating her body to a fever pitch.

He was caressing her very slowly, ever so softly, lighting a fire everywhere he touched. His hands were on the sides of her breasts now, and then he moved them lower to scan her narrow waist, before moving even lower to move leisurely over her hips. He pushed her thighs slightly apart with his knee and placed himself between her legs.

He pushed himself against her in an age old dance; a dance which she had no option but to follow.

Keya shuddered, he felt it; felt the primal thrill seep down into his bones. Through the kiss he sensed her response, felt her restraint slipping away. He could feel her desire, rising to match his; rising to complement his need for her. His body was responding wildly to hers.

Her mouth was moving down his chin, down his throat to where his pulse was beating and she was biting and tasting him there. Kabier felt he would go mad if he didn't have her soon.

Keya didn't resist when his hands returned to caress the sides of her breast, this time intent to take possession. His hands closed firmly around her breasts, to feel, to weigh, to cup and caress. She gasped loudly at this novel experience. His fingers found the unfurled peaks through the thin silk of her shirt and he tweaked and twirled them till pleasure sliced through her body. Kabier unbuttoned her shirt and pushed the halves aside. He unhooked the front clasp of her bra and pushed it aside too and moved his eyes over her now exposed breasts.

God, she was beautiful he thought. He touched her bare skin for the first time and she shivered in delight. She brought his lips down onto hers; aching to kiss him to survive this madness that was unfolding around them. All the while she kissed him, his hands caressed her bare breasts, kneading, cupping and then his thumb was flicking over her bare nipples, tweaking them. Darts of pleasure went searing through her.

Still backed against the wall, Keya watched in helpless delight as he moved his mouth slowly from her lips down to the upper curves of her now bare breasts. She screamed with pleasure when his tongue finally flicked over one taut peak and then almost died when he took the whole mound into his wet mouth, slowly sucking and tasting her. He then repeated the exercise on the other mound.

Keya had never been tempted by any man before. But Kabier was different. He made her body sing with the pleasure he was invoking. She wanted him to take her, to make love to her, to be her first lover. It was as if all the fury that was inside her was replaced by this fulminating desire to join with him.

He returned his mouth to hers in a fevered kiss; informing her, very subtly, that there was no turning back, that he would take her right now. And she gave her acceptance to him, by kissing him back with the same fervor.

Kabier couldn't wait any longer, he knew she was ready for him, that she desired him as much as he desired her and he sought nothing more but to bury himself within her, to put an end to his misery. He knew he had wanted her, from that very first time he had kissed her at the office dinner in the hotel lawns.

He almost picked her up to take her to the huge inviting bed nearby, when the memory of their first kiss washed over him and he remembered with devastating clarity that she was the woman who was selling his company's secrets and she was the one having an affair with his grandfather. It was like a bucket of cold water had been thrown over his raging emotions.

Kabier suddenly stopped, his head now pounding along with his heart.

One moment he was kissing her and in the next he had stepped back and was staring at her stunned. Keya tried to get close to him again, "Kabier, what's wrong?" He put his hand up, stopping her.

"Just don't come close to me," he snarled back, his temper slowly rising.

"I thought...", Keya said still in a daze.

"Yes, you thought you could ensnare me; trap me in the same manner that you did my grandfather," he yelled.

"What does Janak have to do with any of this?" Keya asked innocently, confused by what was happening. Her heart was still beating loudly in her ears and her body could still feel the imprint of his.

Kabier saw her lips and skin, red, with his kisses and he felt like

smashing his fists into the wall. He was extremely angry with himself for falling victim to her charms.

“Just cover the hell up. This was a big mistake. I can’t believe I let myself be caught in your web.”

Keya’s hands were fumbling trying to adjust her clothing back into place. She couldn’t understand a word of what Kabier was saying. The only thing she could make out was that he was extremely furious.

“Kabier, I don’t understand! What are you talking about?”

“OK, so I’ll spell it out for you. First you sleep with my grandfather to get ahead in the company and now you use your wiles to get me to take you to bed. It’s disgusting!” Kabier roared at her.

“What did you just say?” Keya asked stunned! “How dare you?” she yelled back at him. “How dare you accuse me of sleeping with Janak? That’s despicable!”

“How dare I?” Kabier asked, stepping forward. “I have seen the proof with my own eyes; I caught you embracing him, that too in his office. I’ve seen the way he looks at you and the way you behave when he is around, like the light is shining off him. The perfect way to keep a much older lover mooning over you, isn’t it Keya?”

Keya felt the sting of tears at the back of her eyes. But she wasn’t going to cry in front of him.

“How dare you talk like that about Janak and me? How can you be judgmental about my relationship with him, when you don’t know anything about it? And how dare you accuse me of trying to seduce you, you’re the one who started kissing me.”

But Kabier was beyond thinking, beyond listening to reason.

“Everyone in the company knows about your relationship with him, they all know what’s going on behind closed doors, when you are in your so-called meetings with him. Do you think people don’t question how a woman as young as you could have reached such heights in the company? All fast promotions come with a price and you have paid for it well using your body, isn’t it Keya?”

Close to tears now, Keya tried once again to convince him, to explain her relationship with his grandfather.

“For the last time Kabier, I don’t know where the hell you have heard crap like that, but it’s just not true. Janak is...”

“Enough!” Kabier said slicing his hand through the air. “I don’t want

to hear any more lies from you. How can you explain the expensive car he bought you, or the house or your brother's education in London? You certainly have played your cards well. You're nothing but a cunning and conniving tramp, using your friendship with my innocent sister to entrap my grandfather. You're worse than a common whore on the street; at least they accept that they are selling themselves to make their life better.

And what was your plan with me, huh? Entice me and keep me excited by riling me and arguing with me at every opportunity you got? Are you using me to give you the pleasure that you so obviously may not be getting from him?"

Keya could just look at him, shell-shocked, her face deathly pale. As the impact of his last two statements hit her, she swung her hand and gave Kabier a stinging slap on his cheek.

"You bastard!" she yelled at him. Her anger was beyond control now.

She swung her arm to slap him once again, but in one smooth motion he caught her palm in his and held it in a tight grip.

"Don't you dare call me names! Just stay away from me and my family. If I see you near any member of my family, I will personally destroy you." He told her in a cold voice.

Kabier let go of her with a sudden jerk that almost had her falling and without a second glance at her, he just walked out of her room.

The moment the door shut behind Kabier, Keya just fell on the floor weeping uncontrollably. She couldn't believe what had just occurred. Oh God! It was too painful to even recollect. She was simply devastated. She just wanted the earth to open up and close around her. She felt so humiliated.

Keya was so disturbed that she couldn't register that the phone in her room was ringing continuously. She wiped her tear drenched eyes and walked in a daze to the phone by the bed. Lifting it up, she said in a small voice "Hello."

"Hi Keya, this is Raashi. Where in the world have you been? I have been trying to reach you on your cell, but you were just not picking it up."

Listening to her best friend's voice was like a balm to her injured soul and Keya sat on the bed and started sobbing profusely.

"Keya, honey, are you alright?" Raashi stared at Janak, who was sitting next to her, listening to Keya cry on the speaker phone.

Raashi tried again, "Keya, sweetheart, what's up? Please talk to me. Janak is..."

“No, not Janak, please don’t talk about him,” Keya whispered through her sobs.

“What’s wrong honey, what happened?” Raashi asked her softly.

“Promise me Raashi, that whatever I tell you, you’ll never breathe a word of this to Sheena or Janak. Please promise me.”

Raashi looked back at Janak who looked equally worried. She went to lift the receiver of the phone, to make it a private conversation, but Janak held her hand. He just put a finger to his lips and nodded his head. Like her, he was concerned. Understanding him Raashi simply said, “Keya, I am worried. Now, please tell me why you are crying?”

“It’s Kabier, he thinks... he thinks that I am sleeping with Janak, that I am having an affair with him,” Keya said crying again.

“What the hell? Why in the world would he think that, much less say it?” Raashi asked.

Listening to Keya sob quietly into the phone Raashi asked again, “There’s more isn’t it. Keya tell me everything, I want to know.”

After much coaxing from Raashi, Keya calmed down slightly and started telling her friend what had happened.

“After the meeting, we returned to the hotel and we were fighting. I went to my room and Kabier followed me inside. We kept arguing and one thing led to another and before I knew it, he was kissing me. I tried resisting him Raashi, I really did, but I just couldn’t control myself and then I was kissing him back.”

Keya kept silent for a moment before continuing,

“I broke my age old rule with him. I let things go out of hand with him.”

“Keya, please don’t tell me you slept with him,” Raashi begged into the phone.

“No, thank God for that. I didn’t sleep with him, but I would have. I was ready for it.”

Keya continued, “But suddenly, I don’t know what came over him and he started accusing me of sleeping with Janak, of using Janak to reach the position I have in the company.” Thinking about it, the tears sprang from her eyes again.

“And, he accused me of using Sheena to start an affair with Janak. Raashi, he knows about the car, the house and that Janak’s paying for Akash’s education. In the end he blamed me for trying to seduce him and...”

“And what Keya?” Raashi asked feeling her friend’s pain.

“It’s just so disgusting to repeat. He called me a tramp and compared me to a whore and said that I had planned this entire seduction scene with him, so that I could get him to pleasure me, since I obviously wasn’t getting any pleasure from Janak.” Keya was crying uncontrollably now.

Raashi put her hand on her mouth, completely shocked.

Between sobs Keya said, “And he has warned me that if he sees me near any of his family members, he will personally destroy me.”

“I swear that I will destroy him first, when I see him next,” Janak said for the first time through the speaker.

“Oh God!” Keya said shutting her eyes. “No, Janak. Please don’t tell me you were there listening all along. I am even more humiliated now.”

“Raashi tried to tell you Keya, and then once I realized that you were crying so profusely, I just had to know,” Janak said.

“I just can’t bear it Janak. You’re like my grandfather. You have taken care of Akash and me since my own grandfather died. You, Sheena and Raashi are the only family that Akash and I have. I am so hurt,” Keya said, sobbing.

“Honey, I know that, Raashi and Sheena know that and that’s what matters. Keya, I want you to do something for me. You check out of this hotel, right now, you hear me. Take a room at the airport hotel for the night. I am arranging your ticket for the earliest flight out tomorrow. Come back to Mumbai and we’ll deal with it. I’ll deal with Kabier.”

“No, Janak,” Keya said forcefully, wiping her eyes. “He is your grandson; I don’t want any bad blood between the two of you because of me. This is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you about this incident.”

“After all this, you still want me to pretend that nothing has happened,” Janak asked her.

“If I had known, you were on the line, I would never have told you and then you would have never found out, so please for my sake just pretend that it never happened,” Keya begged him.

“Right now Keya just do as I told you. When you check out, the hotel staff will have your ticket and they’ll have a car waiting to take you to the airport hotel. You call me when you reach there. It’s late at night here in India and Raashi will also be going home now,” Janak said.

“But you call me, Keya, I won’t sleep till I hear from you,” Raashi said into the phone.



Keya hung up and packed her bags and left the hotel exactly as Janak had arranged for her. On checking into the airport hotel, she made the calls to Janak and Raashi and went for a shower. She was feeling tainted. She could feel Kabier's musky fragrance permeating through her body and she wanted to rid herself of his touch and his kisses. He had been horrible to her and she hated him for it. She would never forgive him for this.

Kabier checked out of the hotel after breakfast the next morning. He should have been feeling relieved that he finally had warned Keya off, but he was not. At this point he was not sure how he felt except that he sure didn't feel like rejoicing. In fact he was in a very rotten mood. The receptionist had informed him that the other guest with him had already checked out, last night, and that someone from India a Mr. Janak had organized her tickets to fly to Mumbai, India.

Kabier couldn't believe it. She just didn't get it that he was serious about her staying away from his family. He looked at his watch and headed towards the airport to board his own flight back home.

Keya reached Mumbai, late in the afternoon, in a state of nerves. She was feeling unwell and miserable. She hadn't slept the previous night and when she had managed to close her eyes for a brief while, she had woken up to a wet pillow. She had never felt more drained in her life as she did now. She had been unable to rest or to eat anything on the flight. She was completely distraught.

When Raashi come to fetch her from the airport, Keya almost fainted in the car, she was feeling so sick. Raashi took her straight home to bed and called for a doctor.

By the time the doctor arrived Keya was running a high fever with chills. He warned Raashi that someone would have to take care of Keya, as the fever would be rising even higher.

As soon as the doctor left Raashi prepared some warm milk and convinced Keya to drink it. She sat with her while Keya fell asleep, her eyelashes wet with tears. Kabier Sehgal surely had a lot to pay for, Raashi thought to herself.

# Chapter 7

Kabier was sure that he was getting the silent treatment from his grandfather.

He hadn't spoken to him in the two days since he had returned from Vienna and the older man hadn't tried to get in touch with him. But Kabier knew they would have a confrontation sooner than later. His grandfather wasn't the silent type and it was quite obvious that Keya had told him something.

She hadn't been coming to office and Keya's boss Munir had told Kabier that she was unwell.

The next day Kabier was working late in his office when the door opened and his grandfather walked in. Kabier got up from his desk and came forward to greet him, but the old man simply ignored him and sat down on one of the sofas. He was carrying a folder in his hands which he placed on the coffee table in front of him.

Before Kabier could say anything his grandfather said, "You and I need to talk." He indicated that Kabier sit down. Kabier sat on one of the side sofas and turned to face his grandfather.

"Kabier, what you did to Keya was disgraceful. She didn't deserve it."

"What exactly has she told you?" Kabier asked him not sure how much of the truth his grandfather really knew.

"Everything, including all your accusations about Keya having an affair with me," Janak replied.

"Oh! I see. Keya has complained to you about me."

Janak shook his head exasperated. "Kabier, before we get into a heated discussion on this subject, I would like you to read this, please." He picked up the folder and handed it to Kabier.

Still looking at him Kabier opened the folder and pulled out its contents. The top sheet was a hand written letter and the rest was a legal document, a will.

Kabier started reading the letter first.

"I'd like you to read it aloud please, so I am sure that you haven't missed out anything."

*"I, Dhiraj Mishra, of sound mind and body am writing this letter and*

*attaching this will with it.”*

Kabier stopped. “Isn’t he the media tycoon, whose media business you took over on his death?” Kabier asked, sounding obviously surprised.

“Just continue reading, you’ll get all your answers, I assure you,” Janak told him.

Confused Kabier just continued.

*“After my death, I would like that the following things be acted upon:*

*1. I, pass on the legal guardianship of my two grandchildren, Keya Karia and Akash Karia, to my close friend and business associate Janak Sehgal. I entrust Janak to look after my grandchildren as I am sure that he will care for them like his own.*

*2. My entire media business which is worth a few millions as of now, I sign over completely, again to Mr. Janak Sehgal, who will be its custodian until the time my granddaughter Keya Karia is of 25 years of age. After that, the business will go to her, to do with as she pleases. I trust Keya to look after her brother’s interests, no matter what she decides to do with the business.*

*3. My current monetary holdings are worth two million dollars at the time of writing this letter. I entrust Janak with the power to invest this money as he sees fit, with the stipulation that each of my grandchildren benefits equally from his wise investments. I also entrust Janak to use this money to care for all the needs of my grandchildren and to provide them with a certain amount every month. Of the investments made from this money, I request Janak to hand over an equal share of the invested money to each of my grandchildren when they turn 25.*

*4. I leave my house in Mumbai and all the possessions in it equally to both my grand children, Keya and Akash, to be given to them immediately on my death.*

*5. The contents of this letter and the adjoining will shall be known only to my friend Janak and will be shown to my grandchildren only on their 25<sup>th</sup> birthdays and not one day prior.*

*6. That Janak Sehgal will now be the legal guardian of my two grandchildren will also not be mentioned to anyone but to my grandchildren on my death. I want no one of the Sehgal family to know of this lest there be a situation in which my grandchildren are treated unfairly in any way or that they face any danger or threat to their lives, simply by being under the legal guardianship of Janak Sehgal, owner of Sehgal Group of Companies.*

*I am sure that Janak Sehgal will always act in the best interests of my grandchildren and will bring them up to be proud and strong individuals, who I would have been proud of.*

*Finally I apologize to my grandchildren for not having been there for them through the toughest time of their lives and not being strong enough to live longer to support them in this next phase of their life.*

*Signed, Dhiraj Mishra.”*

Kabier was too shocked for words.

“When Dhiraj was writing this letter, I requested him to stipulate what needed to be done if I died before Keya turned twenty five, but he simply refused. He kind of knew that his end was near and was sure in his heart that I would be around to look after his beloved grandchildren,” Janak said wistfully.

Looking at Kabier now, Janak said, “Keya turned twenty five, two years back. I showed her these documents, the ones that you have in your hand right now. I wanted to hand over the media business to her, but she didn’t want it. Well, I had guessed that this would be the case. You see, Keya loved working for Sehgal Systems and I was sure that she wouldn’t change that for anything in the world.

She has legally written off the entire business to her brother, requesting me to continue to operate it till he comes of age. So though the business is under the Sehgal banner, it actually belongs to Keya’s brother now. Akash obviously knows nothing about this. But he has been working in the London base of the business, since the last few years learning its ropes. I did this deliberately knowing that one day he will take it over.”

Kabier sifted through the information in his mind. No wonder no one in the Sehgal family had ever known what was going on in the media business. His grandfather had kept them out of it, because it wasn’t theirs to run, to interfere with in any way. He was simply nurturing and growing the business that his friend had entrusted to him. And he had done a good job of it, the business had done well and grown. It was one of the biggest businesses in the Sehgal Empire; second only to Kabier’s telecom business. Unbelievable! This was simply unbelievable.

“Keya inherited a couple of millions on her twenty-fifth birthday. But being the person she is, she asked me to invest some of it, securing her own future and she donated a lot of it anonymously through me to one of your mother’s charities. The only thing she wanted was a house of her own and her

dream car; which you believe I bought for her. Yes, I bought the house and car, but what you don't know is that, they were bought from the money that she inherited from her grandfather. Her brother's education is also being paid by me but not from my personal account," Janak told him.

Kabier looked at the letter in his hand and read the date aloud.

"He died a month later after writing this letter and will. Keya was only nineteen then and Akash three years younger."

"Didn't they have any other family, what about their parents?" Kabier asked him, he was curious to know.

"Keya's mother Madhu had married Keval Karia much against her father's wishes. Keval was a social climber, who had thought that marrying the only daughter of a rich businessman would get him the fast money and easy life that he had always wanted. But Dhiraj Mishra was a tough nut to crack. He denounced his daughter publicly and refused to maintain contact with her after her marriage. Soon after her marriage, Madhu realized the error of her choice. But it was a choice she had made and she was too weak to do anything about it.

During their growing years, both Keya and her little brother Akash, had watched their father squander every penny he earned, on drinks, women, gambling. He made them move from city to city when his debts couldn't be paid and changed jobs frequently. He was an abusive husband and a bad father. Their mother suffered through all this quietly until the day she died. She died when Keya was thirteen."

"After their mother's death, their father simply handed over the custody of his children to their grandfather for some money and they have never heard of him since. Thank God for that." Janak looked into the distance, a faraway look in his eyes. "I still remember meeting Keya for the first time. I had gone to visit Dhiraj and she was standing in the doorway staring at me, her hand protectively holding her brother's, her chin defiant, ready to face the world."

Kabier could easily imagine the picture that his grandfather painted.

"It was on my recommendation that Dhiraj admitted them to the same boarding school that Sheena was going to at the time. That was the best thing that happened to those two lost children. Keya met Raashi and Sheena there and the three of them became best friends for life."

"I had met Keya several times while she was growing up, but I can't say we were close back then. It was only after her grandfather died, after I

became her legal guardian that we became close. Though she had known her grandfather for only a short while, she cared for him deeply. He had given Keya and Akash a happy and healthy environment to live in. He had provided her the anchor that she was missing in her life and now she was suddenly adrift in a whirling sea, once again. He was gone and she had no one to turn to, no one to look after her and her brother. You must remember that she was only nineteen then. Still a girl; not yet a woman. But she was strong and very brave. When she found out that I was her legal guardian she was visibly relieved. I guess she thought at the time, that if her grandfather could trust me, then so could she.

It was not possible for me to get the two of them to stay with me, due to the condition mentioned in her grandfather's will. So, the two of them continued to stay in their grandfather's house. However, Akash was away studying and it was a big house; Keya found it difficult to manage the house on her own. But she didn't have the heart to sell it. It was their legacy and so she continued to stay there until she became twenty-five. That is when she got her inheritance and realized that she had enough money to keep the family home and to buy herself a smaller apartment."

"Does Sheena know any of this?" Kabier asked.

"Kabier, as I said, the three girls are extremely close, there's not one thing of importance that happens in each of their lives that the other two don't know of. Though they are three different individuals from totally different circumstances they care a lot for each other. Sheena is the only one in the family who knows all this apart from me and now you know it too."

"Sheena, Raashi and Keya. I call them my angels. Janak's Angels! There is not one of them that I love more than the other. My door has always been open for them as it has been for the rest of you. But you guys were all away and the twins were much younger. So these three girls became the light of my life. They would come to meet me together and individually when either of them felt the need. I have spent a lot of time with them together and separately. I know and understand each of them very well. What you did to Keya is unforgivable, Kabier. What made you behave in such a rash manner? It's so unlike you."

Kabier looked at Janak and thought, there was so much that he had learnt in the last one hour. His head was swimming with all the information; he hadn't had the time to digest it all, as yet. He wanted to just sit back and assemble his thoughts. But instead he answered his grandfather.

“Do you remember the two contracts with ACC that Sehgal Systems failed to win?” Kabier asked Janak.

“Yes, what about them?”

“Rishi got a tip from one of his sources that we lost the contracts because the competitors were offering a better price than us. And this was impossible, because we offer better rates than any of the competitors. Besides which, we had a history with ACC. So I got an investigative agency to look into the matter. The agency came back with reports that a woman was involved in the fraud and that this woman had leaked out the rates to the competitors because of which they had won. The agency came up with Keya’s name as she is the only woman who has access to such information. Besides, Keya’s accounts show transactions of up to fifty lakhs each in close proximity to when we lost the two contracts.”

“Fifty lakhs, twice?” Janak asked.

“Yes, we couldn’t trace the account from which the money was transferred though,” Kabier replied.

“That’s because that was a part of the inheritance money that I had given Keya from her trust fund account. It’s a very secure account. And you have to be very well connected to trace it.”

“What?” Kabier asked incredulously.

“Yes, it’s true. I can give you my account number. You can check with the agency, they’ll have the same information with them, except for who the account belongs to.”

“Maybe, as you found out, there is fraud involved somewhere. It could be a woman. But it’s not Keya. I can bet my life on it. She is one of the most honest people I know. She loves her job, and I agree she has risen fast in the organization because of my influence. And why not? You and your cousins have also climbed very high in the organization at a very young age. Keya’s smart and extremely capable. Why would I not want to promote her? And she has proved herself in every way, just like you, Sameer and Rishi have. Trust me Kabier, it’s not Keya that you’re after. It’s someone else. You are looking at it the wrong way.” Janak shook his head.

“I can understand that you could believe that Keya was a suspect. After all, you hardly know her and you’ve just returned to India. So I am not too surprised by your reaction to this information, but what made you think that I am having an affair with her? I dislike even saying it.”

“The agency found out that the woman suspected to sell our

information is having an affair with the top boss. They also mentioned that there are rumors that Keya was involved with you,” Kabier answered quietly.

“That’s the biggest load of bullshit that I have heard in a long time. You can’t seriously tell me, you believed this.”

“Why would I not? Keya was an obvious suspect, you’re still very handsome and she is extremely beautiful. And you do have a penchant for younger woman, don’t you?” Kabier asked him.

Getting no answer from Janak, Kabier continued, “Besides, I could see that the two of you are very close. I saw you always patting her cheeks or she touching your arm, so many things. And what finally hit the nail in the coffin was when I walked in on you hugging her in your office last week.”

“She was a bit low that day and so I just gave her a friendly hug, that’s all. Just to reassure her. I’d do the same with Sheena or Raashi or the twins for that matter. Keya is like a grand daughter to me.”

“But, she was an obvious suspect,” Kabier muttered to himself. Then gathering his thoughts he added, “What about Rithwik Bali, the owner of Fortuna? I saw Keya and him together some weeks back. His is one of the companies that we lost out to, the first time.”

“I know that Rithwik and Keya are very good friends. But if there is something more between them, I know nothing about it. They don’t tell me all their secrets, only the ones they want to. Besides, even if she is seeing Rithwik, I know she wouldn’t jeopardize the company in any way. But, if Rithwik is trying to get information about our prices from somewhere else, that is entirely possible. Come on, we do that all the time don’t we, with our competitors?”

Kabier bent his head down, linked his hands together and put them on his forehead. He shook his head and then ran both his hands down his hair and said, “This is un-bloody believable.” How could he have been so wrong about Keya? His last encounter with her came back in detail to him and he took a deep breath.

“How do you know all this? About what happened between Keya and me? Did she tell you?” he wanted to know.

Janak told him, how Raashi and he had wanted to talk to Keya and had called from the speakerphone in Janak’s home. Keya had picked up the phone but she had been crying bitterly. When Raashi had calmed her down and coaxed her into telling her the problem, Keya had told Raashi about the entire incident. However, she hadn’t known that Janak was also on the line.



"I spoke to her Kabier, she knows that I heard everything. She didn't want me to discuss this with you. She didn't want to create bad blood between us, was the way she put it across. You have put her through hell. She has cried so much in the last few days, that if it was anybody but you who had done this to her, I would've killed him," Janak said sternly.

"She is so unwell, that she hasn't been out of bed ever since she has returned. I am seriously ashamed of you, right now. And you had the audacity to blame her for your own attraction to her. You were going to sleep with her weren't you Kabier? If you hadn't had second thoughts at that point of time, you would have had sex with her." Janak paused waiting for an answer. "Answer me damn it!" Janak yelled at him for the first time since he had entered.

"Yes, OK! Yes, I am attracted to her. It's my fault. I accept it. All of it," Kabier said guiltily.

"Thank God Kabier that you came to your senses earlier, because had you slept with her and then behaved in this manner, then grandson or not, I would have really killed you," Janak said conclusively.

"God, how could I have done this? How could I have been so wrong about her?" Kabier got up and started pacing the floor of his office. Rubbing his fingers on his forehead he continued pacing. "Where is she? I want to meet her."

"I am not sure that is a good idea. I met her last night. She is at her apartment. She hates you right now and she has told me that she is resigning from Sehgal Systems."

"No! No way," Kabier said forcefully. "I am not going to let her. This is my fault and I am going to make it up to her. Where does she stay?" he asked.

Janak told him.

Kabier picked up his keys and mobile from the desk and walked out of his office without saying another word to his grandfather.

Kabier drove down to the apartment block where Keya lived. He parked his car and entered the lobby of the plush new apartment building. The guard on duty stopped him and asked him who he had come to visit. Kabier mentioned Keya's name. The guard asked him to wait while he announced him over the intercom. But Kabier was in no mood to wait. Keya most probably wouldn't agree to see him anyways. So he simply rushed into an open lift, much to the consternation of the security guard who was yelling

and running towards the closing lift doors. He exited the lift on her floor and walked towards her apartment and rang the bell.

The door to Keya's apartment opened at the same time as the guard exited the second lift and came towards him angrily. Raashi walked outside and seeing the concerned guard waved him off, politely thanking him. She stood at the doorway with her hands folded. "Well, well Kabier Sehgal, can't you ever do anything without causing an upheaval?" She rolled her eyes and said rudely, "Anyway, what do you want?"

"Is Keya awake?" he asked her.

"Like I am going to answer that? I know how you treated her and I know she wouldn't want to meet you, so just go away," she countered defiantly.

"Look Raashi, I am not in the mood for verbal games, okay? I want to meet Keya, right now. And we can continue arguing here at the entrance, where the neighbors can listen in or we can behave like adults and take this discussion inside."

Raashi grudgingly accepted what he was saying. So she let him in.

Kabier entered a narrow foyer which opened into a spacious hall. Raashi now stood in the center of the hall facing him, looking at him accusingly. "Keya's sleeping," she said.

"I'll wait till she's up," he told her.

"No, you most certainly will not. I let you in to avoid creating a scene in front of the neighbors. But I am not letting you stay. You have already hurt her enough. I am not going to let you hurt her anymore," Raashi told him protectively.

"I have not come to hurt her. I want to talk to her, to apologize."

"Janak spoke to you, didn't he? He told you everything, right? That's why you're here."

Kabier ran his hand through his hair. "It's my fault Raashi, I behaved like a jerk. I treated her badly. I said things to her that are unforgivable. There is no excuse. But, I want to make it up to her. I promise you, I will make it up to her."

Before Raashi could say anything the phone rang and she went to answer it.

Kabier waited for her to finish. He looked around the apartment for the first time. It was very spacious and tastefully done.

On the wall directly in front of him, above the sofa was a full blown

photograph of Keya standing in front of a very good looking man. The man was holding her at the waist from behind and both of them were smiling into the camera. On a closer look, the man resembled Keya quite a lot. Kabier assumed him to be Akash, Keya's younger brother.

Kabier walked towards the chest of drawers on his right to take a better look at the framed photographs lined on top. There were pictures of Keya with Sheena and Raashi. Some with her brother, one with Janak and the three girls and there was one with Rithwik, Aditya, Raashi and Keya, all dressed in river rafting gear and holding their oars high in the air. Another one showed the four of them sitting outside a tent. The photos gave him a small insight into her life.

He looked around the room and realized with startling clarity that this was a lonely girl who had filled her home with pictures of people dear to her.

He deeply regretted hurting her in the way that he had. She hadn't deserved his venomous accusations. God! If only she could forgive him.

Kabier saw Raashi pacing the dining area, the cordless in her hand. He heard snatches of her conversation. She was obviously convincing the person at the end of the line that Keya was alright. Finally she hung up and turned to look at him. "That was Akash on the line, Keya's younger brother. He's worried sick about her. He was going to board a plane and come over from London, but I convinced him against it. As it is I have Sheena to worry about here."

Kabier suddenly jerked back. Sheena, he'd forgotten about her. He would have even more hell to pay if she found out. Sensing his thoughts Raashi said, "Sheena doesn't know and Keya doesn't want her to know. Sheena thinks that Keya's caught a bug or something."

Suddenly there was a scream and a crashing sound from inside. Frightened, Raashi just ran across the corridor and entered the room at the left end. Kabier followed her. A lamp was on in the room and he could see Keya was tossing restlessly on a huge bed, speaking incoherently. A jug of water lay broken on the floor. Raashi rushed to her side, but she couldn't control her. Helplessly she said, "Kabier do something, she's having one of her nightmares."

Kabier rushed to her side and took charge. He climbed on the bed and held Keya in his arms, speaking softly to her, consoling her. "Keya, it's alright. You're not alone. I am here with you. OK. It's all going to be fine. Just fine." He repeated the words softly and smoothly until the tossing

subsided. But Keya was burning with fever now. He told Raashi, “She’s running very high fever. Get me some napkins and ice water immediately.” Raashi ran out of the room to do as told.

Kabier gently laid Keya down and sat next to her. He lowered the sheet and exposed her arms and legs and waited for Raashi to return. Raashi returned with a bowl of ice water and napkins and they silently worked together, applying the cold compress to Keya’s arms, legs and forehead. Once the fever broke, Kabier rearranged the sheet over Keya. He gently stroked her hair and left the room quietly.

Raashi followed him outside, “Thanks Kabier. I couldn’t have managed on my own.”

“Don’t thank me Raashi, it’s because of me that she’s so unwell,” he told her. “Do you mind if I stay awhile?” he asked her.

Raashi thought for a moment. “Okay, you can stay.”

“Does she often get nightmares?” Kabier asked her.

“Not since a long time. No.”

“Do you know what triggers them?” he asked her.

“When she first came to school, it used to be very often. But slowly they subsided. Then she used to get them only before a test or an exam. Yes, the more I think of it, its fear or anxiety that normally causes her to have a nightmare now.”

“Does she remember what she’s dreaming of or that she’s had one?”

“Vividly and always! She dreams of her parents fighting and her father coming to hurt Akash and her, but their mother comes in the way and dies.”

“My God, that’s terrible,” Kabier said shocked.

“I know, I felt that way too, the first time she told me.”

“You’re pretty close, aren’t you?” Kabier asked Raashi.

Raashi smiled. “Yes, we are! Sheena, Keya and I are close.”

“But Keya and you share a special attachment, right?”

Raashi considered what he had just said for a brief moment before she replied to him, “Neither of us has given it any thought, but now that you pointed it out, yes, I think we have a special connection to one another. This comes from the fact that both Keya and I come from similar backgrounds. She’s had a younger brother to protect and I have a younger sister. At times Sheena can’t see things the way Keya or I would see them. Sheena, at times, can be dreamy-eyed and impractical. But that’s alright, since she comes from a strong and healthy family background like yours.”

She paused, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. “When we were younger Keya and I used to secretly envy Sheena. Envy the family she had, the bond she had with you and her cousins, the fun things that she told us that you did as a family together. But that was a long time ago.

Don’t get me wrong Kabier, Keya and I love Sheena with all our hearts. She is one of us and always will be, no matter what.”

“I know Raashi, I understand.” Then slowly he said, “I think I’ll leave now.”

“I’ll tell Keya that you had come.”

“No, under the circumstances, just let it be. Don’t tell her. She already has enough on her mind.”

Kabier left Keya’s house, exchanging cell numbers with Raashi, with a promise from her that she would call him if she needed anything.

Keya woke up the next morning feeling much better than she had in days. She felt relaxed and was able to move around on her own. She got out of bed and went looking for Raashi, who had been staying with her all through her illness. She found her in the kitchen talking to Keya’s daily help.

“What are you doing out of bed?” Raashi asked her.

“Good morning, Raashi.”

“Come on Keya, you’ve been really unwell these past few days, just go back and lie down, okay?”

“I am feeling fine, much better now. Honest. Is there something to eat? I am hungry.”

Raashi smiled and prepared some breakfast for her.

Over breakfast Raashi updated her on Sheena’s latest wedding information and that she had promised Sheena on both their behalf that the three of them would go shopping with her over the weekend. Keya started listing out which designers they should visit, what Raashi and she would wear and suddenly she stopped mid-sentence.

“What happened?” Raashi asked her.

“Oh Raashi, I simply can’t go to Sheena’s wedding. I can’t bear to face Kabier,” Keya said adamantly.

“Of course you have to go for Sheena’s wedding, you know you can’t miss it. You will have to learn to be in the same room as Kabier, you’re working with him after all. And I am sure by now Janak would have told him everything, so he must be regretting what he’s done,” Raashi said, knowing fully well that Kabier indeed knew the truth and was indeed regretting.

“I am not going to work for him anymore; I’ll find a job somewhere else. I am sure Rithwik will hire me, he’s been offering me a job for years.”

“Keya, come on, you’re not thinking right, you love your job,” Raashi reminded her.

“But as of now I hate Kabier even more than that,” Keya said ending the subject.

“By the way, I had that nightmare again last night. But it was not as bad this time round; I felt as if there was someone strong holding me, giving me their strength to chase the dream away and I did. It’s the first time I’ve felt this way since the nightmares started. Maybe it’s a sign that I’ll finally get rid of them, once and for all,” Keya told her happily.

Raashi said nothing. She couldn’t tell Keya that Kabier had held her in his arms and given her the strength that she needed. This was not the right time. Kabier needed to convince Keya that he was guilty and she needed to forgive him. But would that happen? Only time would tell.

The woman switched off her phone very angry. Somehow Sehgal Systems had managed to win the Austrian contract. She had been so sure of the rates that Sehgal Systems had offered and she had passed them on to her source in Eclipse with extreme confidence. This was not good. It meant that she was not going to get paid any money for this transaction. In any case, she hoped that she wouldn’t need to walk this road again, though it had been extremely beneficial in the past. It was now becoming increasingly dangerous.

## Chapter 8

Keya returned to work the following week. On returning to work, Keya immediately typed out her resignation, requesting that she be relieved with immediate effect and went to give it to her boss Munir. She didn't want to work with Kabier anymore and she didn't want to be near him.

Munir looked at her resignation with dismay and tried to find out her reasons for leaving. Keya simply said that she had personal reasons for leaving and it had nothing to do with him or with the company. He then asked her if Kabier or Janak knew about this. She told him that she had discussed it with Janak and he was aware of her decision.

She was grateful to Janak and him, but she had to move on in life. Munir accepted her decision, with a promise that he would reply to the resignation, and come up with a date, so she could be relieved as soon as possible. In the meantime, she was to continue as earlier.

Keya walked back to her office in slow motion, looking around her, at the place and the people she had worked with for so long. She didn't want to leave this place but she had no choice. Janak had visited her and told her that Kabier knew everything now. Though initially angry that he had gone against her and discussed the situation with Kabier, she understood when he told her that Kabier had to know and that he couldn't expect Kabier to go on believing the worst about her, about his own relationship with her. But Kabier knowing didn't change the way she felt about him at this point. He had hurt her real bad and it was not going to be easy to forget or forgive. She sat at her desk and switched on her laptop intending to clear the stack of emails that had piled up since her sickness.

Kabier stood just inside the door of Keya's office, quietly observing her work. She hadn't yet noticed him, so he took the time to look her over. She was looking thinner after the illness, but she had regained most of her color. He knew she was doing well as he had been in touch with Raashi and he had been subtly asking Sheena as well about her. He also knew that over the weekend, Sheena had taken Keya and Raashi along with her, to help shop for her wedding outfits. If Keya could manage that, then she was definitely back to normal.

He knocked on her door and saw her eyes move from her laptop's

screen to his face, recognize him and grow wide in shock. A range of emotions passed across her face, from shock to anger to hatred and then to resignation. In the next instant she blinked and her face showed none of the emotions that he had just witnessed. She had put a shutter on her feelings.

He entered her office and shut the door. He waved her resignation in one hand and asked her, "What's this Keya?"

"Don't pretend that you don't know what it is," she told him coldly.

"Why?"

"You were the one who didn't want me anywhere near his family and since that's next to impossible working in the same office, it's best that I leave right away," she said, hurtling his ill spoken threat back on his face.

He ran a hand through his hair very disturbed now. She was right, he had told her that and much worse. But how did he even start to apologize to her.

"Look Keya, about that last time..."

But she cut him off. "I don't want to talk about it Kabier."

"But, let me explain."

"No, you believed you had reasons then for behaving the way you did and apparently you now know the truth. But how does that help me? So don't waste your time trying to apologize or trying to take back your words, because you can't. You hurt me really bad that night and you can't change that. Nothing you say or do will ever change that. I've made up my mind that I am not going to work with you in future and I won't change it."

"At least stay till Sheena's wedding is done," Kabier requested her, hoping that she'd agree. "The wedding is two months away and that is a fair thing to ask, considering that we don't have a replacement for you yet. Not to mention the fact that Sheena will be terribly upset if you leave the company without a valid reason. After her marriage she'll be too busy to worry about your resignation and will probably accept any reason you give her."

Keya assimilated and thought over all that he was saying. He was right. She owed it to the company to be there till they found her replacement. And Sheena would bother her nonstop till she told her why she was leaving. So it was for the best.

Kabier saw her pondering over the situation. "Please Keya, two months. It's not a lot to ask, is it?" he requested her humbly.

"Okay," Keya said, "Two months and not a day more."

Keya didn't see Kabier smile before he turned and left her office. He



felt victorious. He had two months to convince her to stay, to convince her that he wasn't a bad guy. He hadn't felt better in days.

"So, as I was saying..." Keya stopped midsentence, the marker in her hand on the whiteboard pointing to something she had drawn to explain herself better. She was in the middle of training a group of managers when Kabier had walked in. He was standing arms folded, leaning against the entrance of the door, silently watching her. Keya felt like her tongue had jammed in her mouth. Some of the managers observing her silence, turned to see what she was staring at. Seeing Kabier, they looked from one to the other baffled.

Watching her discomfort, Kabier said, "Sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt. I just wanted to observe the session for a bit. Keya, please continue."

Mentally berating her lack of control, Keya took a deep breath and continued as if nothing had happened. She tried to switch herself off from the fact that Kabier was watching her, but her rapidly beating heart, continued to remind her of his presence. How she managed to continue the session and appear calm and poised, when she was anything but that, was beyond her.

Kabier watched her skillfully conduct the training, involving everyone present, taking up any question that was asked and raising it to the audience, before she gave her own reply. In the past when dealing with her he had already found her to be extremely efficient but now that he was unbiased, he could really appreciate that she was indeed very good at what she did. And the people seemed to enjoy listening to her and interacted with her comfortably. She had gained back her lost weight and color and she looked excellent as usual in her work uniform of trousers and shirt. Her hair was tied up in a knot and his fingers itched to get it down. He had seen her visible shock at seeing him and then as usual she had masked her face so as to not give away any emotion. He really seemed to read her very well.

As silently as he had come in, Kabier left and Keya breathed a mental sigh of relief when he was gone.

Walking towards Janak's office, Keya reflected on the past few days. She had had several meetings with Kabier in the last week. But they had mainly spoken about work. She had maintained a cool distance from him, giving him only the information that he was seeking, and never spoke more than absolutely needed. She did realize however that he had been nothing but nice to her. None of the rude behavior that he had exhibited earlier showed in

his approach to her and once or twice he had tried to bring up their issue in Vienna, very subtly, but she had cut him off. He was trying to apologize to her, but she just wasn't ready to discuss it with him. She didn't ever want to get personal with him again. Hopefully after Sheena's wedding she would never have to meet him again. She couldn't wait long enough for that to happen.

But right now she needed to meet Janak and discuss an important business case with him. She went up to his office and was disturbed to find Kabier sitting there, engaged in a serious discussion with Janak. He just seemed to be around, no matter where she went. She was about to turn back and leave when Janak caught her standing silently by his door and waved her in. Trapped, she entered the office and walked towards the two of them.

"Keya, hello!" he said warmly.

"Hi Janak."

Kabier, who was sitting on one of the chairs in front of his grandfather's desk, turned slowly to see Keya walking towards them.

Keya saw Kabier silently staring at her and felt distinctly at unease. Finally he said, "Hi."

Before she could venture a reply Janak started coughing loudly. He took a sip of water from the glass near his hand. Keya took the vacant chair next to Kabier and said to Janak, "You're not looking well." He was indeed looking rather pale.

"I am okay. Just a slight cold and cough. By the way, Kabier and I were discussing the recent surge in the stock market index. What do you think? Is it going to remain...?" Before he could finish his sentence, his face became deathly pale and he started coughing again uncontrollably.

Both Kabier and Keya rushed out of their chairs. They rounded the desk and went up to him. Kabier started gently patting his grandfather's back.

After a long spell, Janak finally managed to drink a sip of water and calmed down.

"You have to go home and get some rest," Kabier said.

Janak started to refuse but was cut off by Keya.

"No arguments, you're going home to rest, this was no ordinary cough attack and in fact I'd rather you see a doctor first."

Janak sighed.

"Okay you two. I am going home and I will get a doctor to see me if I start feeling miserable, which at the moment, I am not. So, for the time being

I'll just go and rest," Janak said with finality.

He was such a stubborn old man, always paying little attention to his health. The whole day at work, Keya kept thinking of his coughing uncontrollably and turning pale. She was worried about him. Restless to see how he was doing, she called him just as she was leaving work and planned to meet him at his place for dinner.

Promptly she reached his place at seven in the evening. His housekeeper let her in. Janak was waiting for her in his den. Knowing her way around she went to meet him.

The den was Janak's favorite place in his house. It was a study cum recreation area with a home theater system. Keya entered the den and saw Janak sitting at his desk, reading some papers intently. Looking up at her, he took off his reading glasses and walked around the desk to meet her.

As soon as she saw him, she realized that she had made the right choice in wanting to be with him. He looked worn out and pale.

"You're not doing too well, right?" Keya asked him concerned.

"Keya, it's just a bit of a cough and I have a slight bout of acidity."

"Should I call the doctor?" she asked knowing fully well that he would wait as usual to feel miserable before calling for the doctor.

"I am meeting him tomorrow," Janak informed her.

"But enough of me; come let's take a seat and we can chat comfortably." He waved her towards the dark leather sofas which were placed in a casual seating arrangement on one side of the wall.

"So, Raashi and you both declined to go to London for shopping with Sheena?" Janak asked her.

"Well, it sounded like a crowd, with Sheena, her mom, the twins who are already in London and their mom. It was way too many people already. And honestly, I have too much to do at work. I've just one and a half months left and we're still struggling to find a replacement for me. So..." she left the sentence hanging.

"You're certain you want to quit."

"Positive."

"And Kabier is okay with it?"

"Kabier has no choice," she replied.

"Incidentally, how is it going with the two of you these past few weeks?"

"Well, I certainly can't complain, he has been nice and is trying to

make amends. Although he has tried to apologize, I can't bring myself to discuss it with him."

Janak looked at her quietly for a moment.

"Keya, I know it's hard, but give him a chance, he's not a bad guy. He has a good heart. He was only trying to protect me."

"That may be so, but it's difficult to forget, Janak. What I don't understand is why me, why would he think like he did about me?" Keya asked him.

"Kabier says that he heard it from a very reliable source."

"Apparently not reliable enough!" Keya scoffed.

The housekeeper entered with some snacks. He asked them their preference of drinks and went to the bar area in the den to fix them, an orange juice for Keya and a brandy for Janak. The bell rang at the same time. Seeing the housekeeper was busy, Keya stood, waved at the housekeeper to continue doing what he was and went to open the door.

"You expecting someone?" she asked Janak, as she was leaving the room.

"Could be one of my many girlfriends come to baby sit poor unwell me," he retorted back naughtily.

Smiling at his comment Keya opened the door and the smile froze on her face.

## Chapter 9

Kabier had a date tonight. He was taking Trisha out. Since he had moved back to India, he usually met up with her along with some other friends, but tonight was one of the rare times that it was just the two of them. Trisha was fun, lively and usually had lots to talk about so he normally enjoyed going out with her. But tonight, he was just not in the mood. He didn't want to drive through the Mumbai traffic either, so for a change he was being driven by his chauffeur. He had asked the chauffeur to drop him here at his grandfather's place and then sent him to pick up Trisha. It gave him half an hour to spend with the old man.

He had a feeling all was not well with his grandfather, so he just wanted to satisfy himself. He rang the doorbell of his grandfather's house and was shocked to see Keya open the door. She was smiling at something distractedly and then she saw him at the door and froze. There was a full ten seconds of silence. Each of them was surprised to see the other one. She looked cute he thought. The simple white Lucknowi kurta and leggings made her look chic and Indian. The attire was not sexy in any way, but Kabier could feel a low kick in his body just looking at her. Her lips were covered with the lightest of lip color and her hair was left loose and flowing just the way he liked it.

Kabier broke the silence finally.

"Hi Keya!"

"Hi," she said and moved aside for him to enter.

He entered and turned to look at her.

"He's in the den," she told him and preceded him to where Janak was waiting. She could sense him following her. He had been as shocked to find her here as she'd been to see him. It was a Friday night and she'd expected Janak to be alone, had she known that Kabier would be coming she would never have come. Although she was still angry with him, she simply couldn't control her reaction to him. He looked superb, dressed immaculately in black trousers and a casual black jacket over a navy vee-necked tee shirt. He really was gorgeous she thought to herself.

She mentally gave herself a shake. It was these very thoughts that had gotten her into trouble the last time with him. She had to stop thinking this

way about him. She had to stop this attraction at once.

On seeing Kabier, Janak stood up and Kabier came forward to hug his grandfather.

“Today is surely my lucky day,” Janak said in delight “Two of my favorite people have decided to pay me a visit. What more could an old man ask for?”

“How are you feeling?” Kabier asked him affectionately, noticing that his grandfather was looking tired and unwell.

“Good, good, nothing to worry about as I was just telling Keya some time back. I see you are dressed to go out, a date?”

“Sort of,” Kabier replied nonchalantly.

“So who’s the lucky girl tonight?” Janak teased him.

“Trisha.”

“Nice looking girl. Since when did you start seeing her?”

His grandfather was simply incorrigible. He smiled at him.

“We’re old friends, though we weren’t close, but now since we work together, we’ve caught up with each other a couple of times. Nothing serious.”

“Good. How are the preparations going for Sheena’s wedding, I trust you have everything in control?” Janak asked changing the subject.

Keya watched the two men discuss the plans for the upcoming wedding. There was nothing she could contribute, so she simply kept quiet and listened. Several times she felt Kabier’s eyes on her. But each time she looked at him, he turned away to face his grandfather. She was feeling odd now. She didn’t want him looking at her in any way.

Then Janak turned to look at her and including her in the conversation said, “I was just asking Keya why she didn’t want to go shopping with Sheena to London.”

Kabier raised his eyebrows expectantly, waiting for her to reply.

“Well, all the women in your family were going anyway, so Sheena didn’t need the company and besides I do have a lot of work to take care of,” Keya said.

“Kabier, you still haven’t convinced her to change her mind about leaving the company,” Janak said with a wink.

Keya made a face at Janak. “Stop it. You know I’ve made up my mind.”

“Give me a bit of time, I’ll change her mind for sure,” Kabier said confidently, openly staring at her.

Before Keya could get a word through Janak said, “Good, we can’t have Keya go to Rithwik Bali can we?”

Kabier blinked. A sharp unnamed feeling sliced through his chest as soon as he heard that Rithwik had offered Keya a job. It made him furious. It was simply unacceptable. Keya wouldn’t work for Rithwik, not if he had anything to say about it.

Still staring at her, Kabier said slowly, controlling his fury, “I didn’t know Rithwik has offered you a job.”

“Well, there’s been an open offer from him for many years. I never considered it until now,” Keya replied honestly.

“And are you planning to take it?”

“Maybe I will. It’s definitely an option I am considering.”

She looked up at him and their eyes clashed. They stared at each other silently, defiantly, each knowing the exact reason why she was even considering the shift.

Janak broke the silence. “See, we can’t have that now, can we Kabier?”

His eyes still on her, Kabier replied, “No, that’s not going to happen.”

“Will you two stop talking about me as if I am not here?” Keya said looking from one man to the other. “This subject is closed. It’s not open for discussion, get it?” Getting no reply from either of the two men she repeated in a louder tone, “Okay?”

“We’ll let it rest for now, Keya,” Kabier answered.

The door-bell rang and the housekeeper ushered Trisha in. She entered with a whiff of expensive perfume floating around her. Keya was taken aback looking at her. The girl had guts she thought. She was wearing a red low cut dress that clung to her curves like second skin. She could see Kabier openly admiring her and so was Janak. She rolled her eyes in distaste. God these men! They’re all the same.

Keya could see the other woman scanning the room, her eyes resting on her briefly, contemptuously before she pasted a smile on her lips and went forward to greet Kabier. She hugged him a bit longer than was decent and air kissed his cheeks.

“Trisha, you’re looking lovely as usual,” Kabier said.

Trisha turned to walk towards Janak, shook hands with him and said,

“Good evening, Mr. Sehgal.” He replied to the greeting politely.

Trisha went back to where Kabier was standing and Keya watched with mounting irritation as she ran her fingers over his arm in an obvious display. She clung onto his arm, leaning into him, her ample cleavage on display.

Ugh! Keya thought. The woman was disgusting. And the way Kabier was looking at Trisha was annoying her no end.

Finally Trisha looked at Keya who was seated on the sofa and said sarcastically, “Hi Keya, fancy meeting you here!”

“The feeling is mutual,” Keya replied in the same tone.

Kabier noticed the cold exchange between the two women. Keya didn’t like Trisha; that much he could see clearly. What surprised him was that Keya didn’t like the way Trisha was draped around him. He knew it for certain that she didn’t! He hadn’t missed her disgusted expression when Trisha had wound her arm around his.

This was interesting, Kabier thought. Was Keya jealous? He had to know if there was even a remote possibility that she was jealous. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if she was and if that was important at all, but right now he just wanted to know.

He decided to test out the theory and put his arm around Trisha’s waist, pulling her closer to him. He didn’t like using the other woman this way, but his action was rewarded by the instantaneous flare of annoyance in Keya’s eyes. She looked at him irritably for two seconds and then blinked and then her face settled into an uncaring mask and she looked away from him.

But it was enough for Kabier to know that she hadn’t liked what she saw. He was thrilled at the possibility of her still being attracted to him; a fact that she had cleverly concealed from him in the last few weeks at work, ever since their disastrous encounter in Vienna. The evening suddenly seemed more upbeat to him.

Suddenly his grandfather started coughing severely, holding his chest in pain. Before he could even move, Keya was on her feet and attending to him. She made him sit on the sofa and rushed to get water for him. Kabier too rushed to his grandfather’s side.

After the coughing spell subsided, Kabier said, “You have got to see a doctor. I’ll call for one now.” He was extremely worried. His grandfather was rarely ever unwell and this was the second time Kabier had witnessed this



bad coughing fit. The older man was looking positively pale now.

"I just told him that before you came. But you know him. He'll just do exactly as he pleases. He told me that he'll go to one tomorrow," Keya said looking at Kabier, worry written all over her face too.

"Come on, you two, it's just a bad bout of cough, that's all. I'll be fine. This brandy is helping my throat, seriously."

Kabier and Keya looked at each other still worried. Kabier finally said, "I am calling a doctor now; you seem to have chest pain as well."

"No, Kabier, the chest pain comes only when I am coughing. Seriously, see I am fine now. It's already late in the day. I'll go to a doctor tomorrow for sure."

"I'll go with you," Kabier and Keya said simultaneously.

Janak laughed his color returning. "Both of you are welcome to join me at the doctor if that's the way you'll be at ease. But I am fine now, really.

And Kabier you can't keep a lovely lady waiting can you?" Janak pointed his hand to where Trisha was standing. "Go on."

Kabier wasn't yet convinced, but his grandfather was looking better now and Trisha was waiting.

"He does look better Kabier. We should make a move now," Trisha said.

"I am coming, why don't you get the elevator, I'll join you in a minute," Kabier told Trisha distractedly.

Trisha said her goodbyes to Janak and Keya and went outside as Kabier had asked her.

Kabier looked at his grandfather and started to say something, but he was cut off. "Go, Keya is here with me. She'll be there till dinner. Call and check on me," Janak told him.

"Keya, you call me, in case of anything. You have my number right?"

Keya nodded sharing his concern.

Trisha smiled to herself. She was confident her plan with Kabier was going to be a success. She hadn't missed the way he had looked at her when she had entered the room earlier. Neither had she missed the way he had put his arm around her. They had gone out several times since he had returned to town, but mostly with friends. However recently she had been convincing him to take her out for a movie or coffee, just the two of them, and he had agreed. They had grown closer, but not once had he made a move to touch her or pull her closer like he had tonight. She had decided long ago that

Kabier Sehgal was the man for her. He was intelligent, charming and so handsome. Not to mention that he was super rich. They were just perfect for each other. So, perhaps it was time to change the plan tonight and give Kabier Sehgal the push he needed in her direction.

If all went according to plan, she would be able to surreptitiously slip a bit of Ecstasy in his drink. It was the latest covert drug on the streets and it would take him on a high immediately. After that it would be easy to seduce him. And once he was hers, he would realize soon enough how perfect they would be together. He belonged to her and tonight she would ensure that.

Kabier was unusually quiet right through the drive to the hotel and during dinner. He knew he was bad company, but he just couldn't pay attention to what Trisha was talking about. His mind was on his grandfather and on Keya. He couldn't stop thinking about her. She really was so concerned about his grandfather. He had behaved abominably with her in Vienna and she hadn't deserved it. He had to get her to forgive him.

But the silver lining was, he was now sure that she was attracted to him. That was the highlight of his evening. Remembering the way her eyes had flared in anger, when he had put his arm around Trisha, still gave him a thrill. Oh, he wanted Keya alright! He had wanted her from the first time his body had stirred when she had run into him, that very first meeting of theirs and he wanted her still. Remembering how lovely she looked, in white, today was doing unimaginable things to his system.

So what the hell was he doing with another woman, when the woman he wanted was in easy reach of him at his grandfather's place looking after his grandfather, he asked himself. He should have been with her, helping her care for the old man.

He wanted this evening to end, but he couldn't do it without hurting Trisha's feelings. So, for the time being, he had to get a leash on his thoughts and pay attention to his date.

Trisha could see Kabier was distracted and it was infuriating her no end. But she kept her smile pasted on her face. She had tried to engage him on so many different topics, but he clearly wasn't paying attention. He just smiled and gave her inconsequential replies.

Dinner was over and they were entering the night club. Kabier got her seated on one of the bar stools and ordered drinks. He had his back to the bar table and was observing the gathering crowd on the dance floor of the night club.

She touched his arm and said, “She’s become more open about her relationship, hasn’t she?”

“What are you talking about?” Kabier asked turning to look at Trisha.

“Keya.”

“What about her?”

“I mean, it’s sick the way she’s openly flaunting her relationship with Mr. Sehgal. You saw it yourself didn’t you?”

“No! You’re mistaken. She just cares for him that’s all.”

“It seemed much more than that to me. She is staying with him tonight isn’t she?” Trisha asked.

“She is staying on a little longer just to ensure that he is alright. And Trisha, Keya is not involved with my grandfather. I know you told me earlier that people in office are talking about it. But the next time you hear someone say something like this, you send them to me and I’ll deal with it,” he said forcefully.

After Kabier left, Keya had dinner with Janak. It was an enjoyable evening and they discussed everything under the sun as they usually did. It was getting late and Keya was thinking of leaving. Janak and she had retired to the den and were watching a comedy on television when she looked his way and saw that he had become absolutely pale.

“What’s wrong? Janak?” she asked him, very worried.

He caught his chest and whimpered in pain. He was obviously finding it hard to breathe.

“Keya, my chest hurts terribly,” he told her breathlessly.

Oh God! Janak was having a heart attack. Why the hell hadn’t she thought of it earlier.

Keya shouted for the housekeeper who came running. Together the two of them made Janak lie down on the sofa.

She started running towards the bathroom where she knew he kept all his medicines. She was rummaging through the cupboard, pushing and dropping medicines till she found a pack of Asprin. She had read that Asprin slowed down a heart attack. Well now was the time to act on the information and see whether it was accurate or not. She rushed back to Janak who was hardly breathing and popped a pill under his tongue, just as she had read. Then she asked the housekeeper to urgently call for an ambulance. She tried to talk to him, but he wasn’t responding. Scared now, she checked his breathing and it was slow. She checked his pulse and that too was real slow.

Immediately she started the CPR technique that she had learnt in one of the various camps at college. She continued this way till the ambulance arrived, all the while praying that he would be alright.

Once the medical team had taken over, she grabbed Janak's cell, her purse and keys and ran to her car.

From Janak's cell she called his doctor and explained the situation to him and what she had done in the circumstances. He told her that he'd be waiting for them at the hospital. She drove like a mad woman, sick with worry. Oh God, please let him be alive. Please let him get to the hospital. She prayed fervently.

She then called Kabier from Janak's cell. She called him once, then twice and then again. His phone simply kept ringing. Then she picked up her phone and started dialing again. Pick up, please Kabier, pick up the phone, Keya prayed silently.

The music had gotten louder and with so many people packed into the place, it was impossible to talk and be heard. Trisha had to get her plan in motion immediately. She saw Kabier eyeing the crowd; his drink was lying untouched in front of her. Very carefully she extracted the vial of Ecstasy from her purse and put a few drops into his drink and slid the vial back into her purse.

A sudden flash of light caught her eye. Kabier's phone, which he had placed on the bar top, was ringing. The music was so loud that he obviously couldn't hear it. Trisha opened her mouth to tell him, but her eye caught the caller name flashing on the phone. It was Keya. That woman was becoming a constant thorn in her side. But Trisha wasn't going to let Keya spoil her plans for tonight. Very quietly she lifted a paper napkin and put it on top of the phone. Kabier looked at her and she smiled and started talking to him. She lifted his glass off the bar table and handed it to him.

"You're not drinking anything."

He took the drink from her and raised it to his mouth but suddenly put it back down on the bar table. "Where's my phone?" he asked. "I had put it here somewhere." He started looking around the bar top and found his phone under some paper napkins.

"Ah! Here it is," he said. On an impulse, he checked to see if he had received any calls. He pressed the button and saw he had ten missed calls, seven from Keya and three from his grandfather. In the next moment his phone was ringing in his hand. Keya was calling him.

Quickly, he picked up the phone and without a word to Trisha walked out of the night club.

“Kabier, thank God,” Keya said between tears.

“What’s happened?” Kabier asked her, worried now, hearing her shaken voice.

“It’s Janak, he’s had a heart attack.”

“What?” Kabier yelled into the phone.

In between tears Keya told him what had happened.

“I’ve been trying to reach you. I’m at the hospital.” She gave him the name of a city hospital. “He’s inside now; the doctors have taken him in casualty. Please come soon. I am so scared.”

“Keya, you hang in there. I am coming. I’ll be there in ten minutes,” he said and hung up the phone. He literally ran to the hotel porch calling his driver at the same time and asked him to get the car immediately. He went up to the concierge.

“There is a lady in a red dress by the bar downstairs. Her name is Trisha Mehta. Please give her my apologies and tell her that I won’t be joining her for the rest of the evening. Also please arrange for a car to drop her home. Here, give her my card, she’ll believe you then.” Kabier handed over his business card to the man.

Kabier’s driver was waiting with the car for him. Kabier took out his wallet and extracting a few notes, handed them to his driver and asked him to go home. He got into the driver’s seat himself and with a squeal of his tyres zipped off to the hospital. On the way he called Sameer. In one ring Sameer picked up the phone and said, “Hi Kabier!”

Without wasting any time, Kabier simply said, “Grandfather has just had a heart attack. Keya’s with him and has got him to the hospital.” He gave him the name of the hospital and asked him to meet him there.

“I am in the car Kabier, reaching in ten.”

# Chapter 10

Both the cousins reached the hospital at the same time. Entering the hospital reception, Kabier asked for the emergency area and the two of them ran there.

Kabier saw Keya pacing the length of the floor. She turned and saw him and in the next instant came running towards him and on reaching him put her arms around his neck and held him close, tears rolling down her cheeks, hugging him tight, like her life depended on him.

“Thank God, you’re here. It was so horrible. One minute he was fine and in the next he was holding his chest whimpering in pain.”

“It’s OK sweetheart, I am here now,” Kabier told her, reassuring her.

“He fainted Kabier, I thought he had died.” She continued, more tears welling up her eyes. Kabier wiped the tears from her eyes with his hands and kissed the top of her forehead. She was still clinging to him. He hugged her back, whispering soothing words to calm her down. He walked towards the waiting couches, still holding her and pushed her into one of them and sat next to her.

Sameer looked at the two of them very surprised. They were sitting on a couch, oblivious to his presence, still holding each other, Keya, crying into Kabier’s chest and Kabier simply holding her and whispering words into her ear. Much later when all this was over, Kabier and he would have to talk. But right now they needed to know what was going on with their grandfather.

Sameer went up to the two of them and crouched down in front of them. Noticing him for the first time Keya moved away from Kabier.

Sameer asked, “Have you heard from the doctors?”

“Not yet,” she replied.

Sameer got up and got her a glass of water from the water dispenser which she accepted.

Looking at the two men, she asked, “What about your family? Have you informed them?”

“Right now, it’s just Sameer and I,” Kabier said. Looking at Sameer he asked, “What about Rishi, is he still out of town?”

Sameer nodded. “Yes, but dad is here. I’ll wait till I hear from the doctors before informing him. I don’t want to worry dad till I know for sure.”

“I guess that’s the best. As it is all the women of our family are currently in London. Rajiv is not in town as well. So let’s wait to hear what the doctor says before informing everyone,” Kabier said practically. Looking at Keya he asked her gently, “Have you informed Raashi?”

She looked back at him and shook her head, “She’s out of town too.”

The next hour was filled with a terse silence that none of them dared to break. They were all scared and worried.

Finally a doctor came out towards them. Recognizing the doctor who was in charge, Keya rushed to him, the two men following close behind her heels. The doctor a grey haired man in his late fifties, looked at the three of them. “Which one of you is in charge here?”

Kabier came forward. “That will be me. I am Kabier Sehgal. That’s my grandfather in there.”

“Well Mr. Sehgal, your grandfather has suffered a heart attack, just as I had suspected when this lady called me frantically detailing his condition.” Turning to look at Keya he said, “I think that the Aspirin and the CPR you administered him, may have actually saved his life. Quick thinking on your part, I must say.”

“But, there is some bad news, right?” Kabier asked perceptively.

“He’s not out of danger yet. We have performed a surgery to clear the block in his heart. He is unconscious and we will need the next eight hours to know if the treatment that we have administered is taking effect. If he regains consciousness in the next eight hours, he will be more or less, completely out of danger. We’ve moved him to the ICU and unfortunately that means that none of you can go in there.”

“And what if he doesn’t regain consciousness?” Sameer asked.

“Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it, alright? And I need one of you to come with me to fill up some forms.” Kabier nodded to Sameer who followed the doctor to complete the required formalities.

Keya turned to Kabier and said, “Please tell me he’ll be alright. Please. I can’t bear to lose him too. He’s been my anchor since the last so many years. I’d willingly exchange places with him if I could.”

“He’ll be fine Keya, I promise you that.”

The next eight hours were the longest in Kabier’s life. Neither he, nor Sameer or Keya had slept a wink. The three of them had sat silently, lost in their thoughts, drinking several cups of coffee. It was five in the morning and the doctor still didn’t have news.

Getting restless he went to the nurse station to check with the staff on duty if they had any information. Getting a negative reply from them he went back to where Sameer was standing. Sensing Kabier next to him, Sameer faced him and then nodded his head in the direction he had been staring earlier. Kabier looked at where Sameer was indicating and was stunned.

Keya was standing in the corner of the waiting room, in front of a huge idol of Lord Ganesha, her head bent, her hands joined in prayer in front of her. She had covered her head with her stole, as a mark of respect to the deity she was worshipping. None of the women he had ever been attracted to in the past were even remotely religious in anyway or even if they were they had never shown it.

He himself was not very religious, his mother had tried over the years to get him to go to the temple regularly, but he had just balked at her efforts. Not that he didn't believe in God, he did, but in his own way.

He watched Keya, silently praying for the life of his grandfather. In that moment Kabier felt something strong tug at his heart. He wasn't sure what this meant; just that he had never felt like this before.

Sameer distracted him by saying, "She's close to our grandfather that much I've gathered. What I've not understood is how and why?"

Kabier told him. He told him everything. About his suspicions, his behavior with her in the past, about Vienna, he didn't leave out anything.

Sameer whistled softly, "She's the owner of the entire media business, wow."

"Well, legally speaking it's her brother, but he doesn't know that yet," Kabier told him, glancing back at where Keya was standing, still praying.

"And how do you feel about her now that you know the truth?" Sameer asked him, as usual getting to the crux of the situation.

Kabier tried to assemble his thoughts. He really hadn't given much thought to his feelings for her, to emotions that ran deeper than the attraction that he felt for her.

"Honestly, I am not sure," Kabier said.

Before Sameer could ask anything more, the doctor came out looking for them. The two men walked towards him, looking at each other, seeing the concern reflecting in each other's eyes.

Addressing Kabier the doctor said, "I have some good news for you. Your grandfather had regained consciousness for a while and now with the effect of the medicines has gone back to sleep. This shows that his body has



responded well to the treatment. We'll keep him in ICU for today. If all goes well, we'll move him to a regular room tomorrow. But we'll need to monitor his health for the next few days before we let him go home. I'll keep you informed. But there is no danger anymore."

The two cousins looked at each visibly relieved, and thanked the doctor, shaking hands with him.

"I'll call and inform Dad. I suppose you're going to get busy too," Sameer said looking from Kabier to Keya. "Go tell her."

Kabier didn't waste another minute, he quietly went up to Keya who was still praying and put his hand on her shoulder, squeezing lightly. She looked up at him dazed.

"The doctor's just spoken to me. He's fine Keya. He's out of danger. Looks like whatever you wished for out here has been fulfilled," he said, looking from her to the idol she was worshipping, silently sending thanks from his side too.

"Oh Thank God!" Keya said. Without thinking, the two of them just went into each other's arms, like it was the most natural thing in the world for them. Kabier held her close, letting the worries and stress of the last several hours flow out of him. He was so relieved. He hadn't realized till now how tightly wrung he'd been.

Keya shut her eyes and gave herself into the embrace. Janak was going to be alright. Thank God.

They were still holding each other when Sameer came up to them and coughed naughtily. The two of them stepped apart.

"It's not fair that you two get all the hugs, I want one too," he told them with a naughty grin.

Laughing, Keya promptly hugged him.

"Dad's on his way, pretty upset from what I heard on the phone. So, I'd get scarce if I were you," Sameer said.

"I think that's a pretty good idea. I'll drop Keya home and freshen up and come back later," Kabier said.

"No, I want to stay," Keya said making a face.

"Keya, they're not going to let you meet him, why don't I drop you home and you freshen up and come back."

Keya still wasn't convinced. But Kabier was insistent and he wouldn't take no for an answer. Finally she relented. "OK, I'll come with you. I'll return in a while."

“Good. Let’s go, before my uncle arrives and yells at me. Bye Sameer. I’ll see you later.”

They decided to leave Keya’s car parked at the hospital, so Kabier could bring her back, when he returned to the hospital. It saved them from taking two cars back and forth.

Kabier stopped the car in front of her house and before she could get out he said, “I haven’t thanked you.”

“For what?” Keya asked.

“For in all probability saving my grandfather’s life.”

Keya just smiled at him and got out of the car and watched him drive away.

“So, it’s decided then. Dad will inform mom and your mom. And he’ll convince them to stay on in London,” Sameer said. “The way I see it, grandfather’s not going to get any mental rest if our moms descend and start their fussing around him. So it’s best they leave the looking after to us. As Dad can do most of his work from here or at home, he’ll be here from morning to evening and Kabier you said that you’ll do the evenings and I can stay the nights.”

“And if he doesn’t agree to move in to one of our places after the hospital, which I am sure he won’t agree to do, we just continue this routine once he’s at his own place. So are we all in agreement?” Kabier asked.

Keya had watched the three men silently all along. Between the three of them they had come up with a perfect solution to look after Janak, without involving any of the women in their family. It was presumptuous of them. But, it was the best solution, she had to admit. Janak disliked being fussed around and his illness gave the perfect excuse to his daughters-in-law to take charge of his life and he would hate that. So she just listened quietly.

Kabier had picked her up from her home at noon and driven her to the hospital. It had given her a bit of time to freshen up and attend to some matters at home.

Sameer’s dad had been there at the hospital when they’d arrived, still very angry for not being informed earlier, but Kabier had pacified his uncle quickly. She watched him now, taking charge as usual, as was his nature. Everything had happened so fast since last night that she hardly had a chance to reflect. She reasoned that it was only natural that she had turned to Kabier for comfort. Twice she had hugged him, gone willingly into his arms. She

had wanted him to hold her close, to give her the reassurance that she needed. And he too had responded in the same vein. This had been a difficult time for both of them. She tried to convince herself that the only reason that she had so easily turned to him was because she was alone and there had been no one else to turn to at that time.

“OK, so I am off now, I am beat,” Sameer said. “I’ll see you all at night.”

Kabier had got his laptop to the hospital and started working on it. The hospital was equipped with the latest Wi-Fi technology and in minutes he was connected, engrossed in his work.

Keya passed her time chatting with Sameer’s dad. She was at ease with him despite only ever having met Sameer’s parents in passing and that too she couldn’t remember how long ago.

Sameer’s dad, Jai Sehgal, was a lawyer and he oversaw the legal aspect of things within the Sehgal Group. She had never needed to meet him personally as most of the time it was someone from his huge team, who drew up the contracts for her when she was signing new deals. She had heard that he was a tough nut. Sheena had told her that when her own father had died, Janak had tried to convince him to participate more in the business and help him run it. Jai, however, had been adamant and loyal to his chosen profession and had not expressed any interest in taking over from his father. But he had helped Janak train the next in line well. Kabier, Sameer and Rishi were already taking the business to new heights and they had only just started a few years back.

Sameer’s dad was a great storyteller and soon he was regaling her with tales of Kabier and his two cousins and all the mischief they’d been up to in their growing years. Keya listened intently, learning as much as she could about Kabier, about the child he had been, about the man he had become. She watched him as unobtrusively as she could. He was lost in concentration and she let her eyes roam his face, the sharp cheekbones, the honey colored eyes, the perfect nose. He was so gorgeous, more than any man had a right to be, she thought. She caught herself and concentrated on what Jai Sehgal was saying.

Kabier was bone tired now and couldn’t focus on work anymore. He had been at work on his laptop for a long time. It was almost eight in the evening and he needed to get some rest. He looked over at Keya who had been busy chatting with his uncle for several hours now. She seemed to be

enjoying herself. Kabier watched her laugh at something his uncle said. She really had a nice smile. It lit up her face completely, he thought.

But she looked worn out, she was yawning incessantly now. He had to get her home and in bed, soon, or she would surely fall asleep on her feet. Like him she too hadn't had any sleep since last night. He switched off his laptop and put it away.

Sameer came then with some soft drinks and sandwiches for all of them. He was staying the night, so as soon as they had finished the small snack he had got, they all got up to leave. Keya too. Kabier had expected some reluctance on her part to leave, but she was too tired, it seemed.

She had insisted on driving herself home, but Kabier had easily overruled her. She clearly wasn't fit enough to drive. And sure enough she fell asleep in the car while he drove her home. Not wanting to wake her, he parked his car and dug through her purse for her apartment keys. Taking them he got out, went to her side and lifted her sleeping form in his arms. She snuggled against him and he carried her all the way up in the lift, to her apartment. It was difficult to open the door while carrying her, but with a bit of luck he managed it without waking her up.

He knew which room she used so he carried her to her room and gently laid her down on the bed, but she wouldn't let him go, she held on to him. Nothing he did, would release her hold on him. So he whispered softly, "Keya, I have to go now." She opened her eyes, waking up and released her hold on him. He switched on the air conditioner in her room and put the blanket on around her, tucking it around her. As he turned to leave, she caught his hand.

"Stay," she said. "Stay with me tonight."

"Keya, this is not a good idea."

"Just hold me Kabier, that's all I want. I am scared of being alone tonight."

"Keya, you don't know what you're asking for. You'll hate me in the morning if I spend the night with you."

"And if I promise not to hate you, will you stay, please, just this once, I can't bear to be alone tonight."

He couldn't refuse the plea in her eyes. Though alarm bells were ringing in his brain, his heart was singing a different tune. He wanted to be there for her, to hold her, to wipe her fears away. He knew how tough it must have been for her, handling the whole situation on her own, when his

grandfather had collapsed.

“OK, I’ll stay.” Saying so, he stepped out of his shoes and promptly climbed onto the bed, got under the blanket, and took her in his arms. Within seconds she was fast asleep and before he knew it so was he.

Kabier woke up to a whimpering sound. It was Keya. She was tossing and turning restlessly, obviously caught in the midst of her recurring nightmare. He tried to calm her down like he had the last time, but it was not working, she wasn’t responding. Nothing he did would calm her. So he did the one thing he was absolutely certain would make her respond. He kissed her. He pushed her down on the bed and moved on top of her. Thus entrapping her, he stopped her struggling, held her face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers, kissing her gently. She was still whimpering and he deepened the kiss by letting his tongue slowly trace the inner contours of her mouth. Her struggles still hadn’t ceased. He gently increased the pressure of his kiss, sucking on her lips, wetting them with his tongue. Within a heartbeat she had stopped struggling and was reciprocating, kissing him back passionately. Her hands moved over his back and she held him tight, angling her mouth, to gain better access to his. Kabier felt like a war waging inside him. His body was responding wildly to hers and if he didn’t stop this sheer madness now then he never would be able to. Reluctantly he ignored his raging hormones and slowly moved away from her.

At peace now, Keya just snuggled into him and continued to sleep. But sleep was farthest from Kabier’s mind right now. He checked his watch, it was early morning. He got out of the bed and quietly left Keya’s apartment.

Keya woke up with a start. Something had disturbed the blissful sleep she had been enjoying. Looking around, she tried to figure out what had woken her up. Then she realized that a phone was ringing in the distance. She grabbed her purse and pulled out her phone. It was Sheena. Pressing the button, she said, “Hi Sheena!”

“Keya, tell me he’s alright, please.”

“He’s out of danger for sure. I am not sure when he’ll be fine though.”

“I am so tense. I wanted to come back immediately after Sameer’s dad called, but they’ve all convinced my mom and aunt that’s it best we stay here and finish our work. I spoke to Kabier and you know how he is, he just doesn’t want us women back and interfering in the way they are caring for him. It’s so annoying.”

“Calm down Sheena. I am sure Janak wouldn’t want all of you fussy

women haranguing him. He'll want you all to leave him alone. Besides, he's going to be in the hospital this entire week, so you coming here is not going to help him."

"Kabier told me how you'd taken grandfather to the hospital. Keya it must have been horrible for you, to see him collapse like that."

Keya shut her eyes as she recollected those terrifying moments.

"Sheena it was terrible, the way he suddenly collapsed. I was so scared. But let's not talk about that. He's better now and out of danger. He is tough and he is going to survive this also."

"Keya, tell me honestly, don't go by what Kabier says, do you think I should come back now?"

"Honestly, it's not required. I am here and Raashi will also be back soon, so we'll take care of him for you. Unless you want to come home now and then postpone the wedding, because you do know that you won't be able to make this trip again before the wedding, don't you?" Keya asked her.

That kind of hit the nail on the head, Keya thought, because the one thing she was sure of was that Sheena didn't want to delay the wedding at all. She was excited to start the rest of her life with Rajiv.

"Okay Keya, call me every day and tell me about his progress."

They spoke for a while more and Keya hung up with a promise to meet Sheena as soon as she returned.

Keya disconnected the phone and looked at the clock on the wall in front of her. Goodness it was past noon. She had slept for way too long.

She got out of bed and realized that she'd been sleeping fully dressed in yesterday's clothes. Then it suddenly dawned on her. She had fallen asleep in Kabier's car. She remembered Kabier carrying her from the car and that when he was leaving, she had pleaded for him to stay. And that he had held her in his arms. That was the last thing she remembered. Sometime in the morning he must have left her apartment to go back home.

She hit the palm of her hand on her head. Stupid! So stupid! Now how was she to face him, after sleeping in his arms the whole night? If ever there was a hole that one dug for oneself, then this was it for her, Keya thought. But the fact of the matter was that she was more affected by Janak's situation than she had expected. She had been so scared to see him collapse. She just hadn't wanted to be alone last night. She had just wanted someone to hold her, to protect her, to make her feel that everything was alright. She shook her

head. Why was it that daylight always gave a different perspective to things?

She knew her history with Kabier. She couldn't let Janak's illness thaw her over, with regards to him. She was still angry and hurt by him. She had to remember that and today when she met him she would behave as if nothing had happened. Well, nothing had actually happened, she convinced herself. The two of them were caught in a situation when someone they both cared for dearly was seriously ill and they had simply turned to each other for comfort. That was it. Nothing else. She told herself severely.

It was a Sunday and it was the day off for her hired help, so she got out of bed and quickly freshened up. She had household chores to do today and if she didn't get started then she'd never finish in time to return to the hospital. She made herself some breakfast and nibbled on her toast when she remembered that she had the nightmare again last night. But like the last time it had been different, she hadn't woken up sweaty and afraid. In fact, recollecting it now, again some force had pulled her out from the depth of her nightmare and taken her to a happy place.

Dear God, had Kabier witnessed the nightmare? She sincerely hoped not. It was one of her weaknesses and one she didn't want him to know about.

Her cell phone rang again and she was interrupted out of her thoughts. It was Kabier.

"Hello," she said.

"Keya, Hi! I just called to check if you're Okay."

"I am fine. Just woke up actually. What time did you leave?"

"Pretty early in the morning."

"Um, Kabier... Did I talk in my sleep or something last night?" Keya asked, wanting to know if he had witnessed her nightmare.

There was a moment of silence before Kabier said, "Do you talk in your sleep normally?" He understood what she was subtly asking him.

"At times. So did I say anything last night?"

"No. You didn't," Kabier replied. It was the truth because she hadn't said anything in particular.

Relieved Keya asked, "Uh, any news of Janak?"

"Yes, he's awake. I got to the hospital as soon as Sameer's dad called to inform me about it. They've moved him from the ICU and he's asking for you."

"I'll be there immediately. Tell him I am coming."

“Should I come and get you?” Kabier asked, knowing her car was still in the hospital’s parking lot.

“No, I’ll come on my own.” Saying so, Keya hung up. Keya took a cab to the hospital. Tomorrow was the start of a new week at work and she needed her car. But it was sweet the way he was concerned about her, calling to check on her and offering to fetch her.

Get a grip Keya, her rational mind took over and told her. Kabier knew he was at fault where she was concerned and she had done her best to save his grandfather’s life. So he was bound to be nice to her.

Kabier watched her from his position by the window, softly talk to his grandfather. Keya was ignoring him. That was the only possible explanation, he concluded. She hadn’t spoken a word directly to him ever since she arrived at the hospital and she had refused to look at him when he had spoken to her.

He had known that spending last night in her bed had been a mistake in more ways than one. For starters he could see that she was regretting it. That’s why he was getting the royal cold shoulder from her. He was sure that she didn’t remember their kiss, if she did, then for sure, she wouldn’t be talking to him at all. But the most relevant point was that he was so damn attracted to her. He had known so many women in his life, but no one had affected him the way Keya did. Just thinking how her soft body had laid pliant beneath his hard one last night, was driving him mad with desire.

“I think you should rest now,” Keya told Janak and kissed his cheek softly. “I’ll come by in the evening again.”

Keya got up to leave, waved to Sameer’s dad and left the room. Kabier followed her outside silently.

“Keya, we have to talk. About last night...”

“Last night was a big mistake. Both of us were vulnerable and I more so. Sheena and Raashi are both out of town and I just simply turned to you for comfort. That’s all. So please don’t make a big deal of it.” She told him in a cool manner and before he could get a word out, she just walked away.



# Chapter 11

Kabier watched her leave. She was shutting him out. She was back to being angry with him. He thought that the events of the last two days had changed her perception of him, but apparently that was not the case. She had clearly realized that she had exposed her vulnerability to him and now she was shutting the door on him. Well, he had a huge battle on his hands. If he wanted to be victorious, not only would he have to change her opinion of him, but he would have to make her want him, like he wanted her. He would win this battle and would enjoy winning it. Kabier smiled and went back inside to his grandfather's side.

Raashi had returned to town the very next day. Keya fetched her from the airport and gently updated her on the situation. Raashi had insisted on going to the hospital immediately. Meeting Janak and seeing that he was better had eased her mind a bit. The two of them had decided to meet at the hospital every day in the evening.

Kabier hadn't been able to find even one moment to talk to Keya alone. She was always with Raashi at the hospital and at work the two of them were way too busy. During their routine meetings she was back in business mode and had insisted she bring her boss Munir, so he would also be updated, since she would be leaving soon in any case. In short, he was frustrated as hell. She just wasn't giving him a chance to talk to her in private; and in public she behaved as cool as a cucumber with him, ignoring him most of the time and speaking to him only when absolutely needed. He had to do something to change this status quo.

Over the weekend Janak was going home. She had spoken to the dietician in charge of Janak's meals at the hospital and with her help had prepared a diet plan for him which he would need to follow from home. She reached Janak's house early so that she could help his housekeeper understand the new meal schedule.

Kabier also reached his grandfather's place to check if everything was in order and ready for his grandfather's homecoming. He wasn't at all surprised to find Keya explaining the do's and don'ts of his grandfather's new diet plan to the housekeeper. He let himself inside the house with his grandfather's key and stood and watched her silently, while she was totally

engrossed in her discussion.

When she had finished, she turned around and was startled to see him.

“Oh, I didn’t hear you come in,” she said.

“I have grandfather’s keys,” he said raising the bunch of keys in his hand to show her.

“So where is he? I thought you were getting him home.”

“I was, but Sameer decided he’d fetch him home, so I came by just to check if everything was in order for him.”

“Yes, I thought the same.” She said, brushing her hair with her hand and looking everywhere around the house but at him.

“Keya, I want to talk to you,” he said, but before he could continue the door-bell rang.

Keya looked at him and shook her head in the negative, making it clear that she didn’t want to continue this conversation. She then walked past him and headed to open the door. Letting out a frustrated breath, Kabier followed her to welcome his grandfather home.

Keya helped Janak settle in and as soon as she could, she left.

She decided to visit Janak in the afternoon the next day. It was the weekend and she was sure that Kabier would get there only in the evening; she wanted to avoid him at all costs. She knew he wanted to talk to her, but she didn’t want to be caught in anything remotely private with him, not even a conversation. She felt edgy around him and besides, she didn’t want there to be a situation which she couldn’t control. She rang the bell of Janak’s home very calmly, supremely confident that Kabier wouldn’t be there for hours and she could spend her time with Janak in peace; without Kabier’s eyes watching her as they usually did nowadays.

Well for someone she wanted to avoid, she sure spent a great deal of her time thinking of him, Keya scolded herself. She had to get her act together and stop thinking about Kabier Sehgal.

The housekeeper let her in and she walked into the hall of Janak’s home completely taken aback to see Kabier, resting on the sofa, his legs stretched out in front of him, reading a business magazine. His eyes moved to her, standing rigid in shock, staring open mouthed at him.

“What? You didn’t expect to see me here?” he asked in his usual straight forward manner. He hadn’t bothered to get up. He was still in the same position on the sofa, the magazine casually flung to a side.

“Well, I...umm...” Keya mumbled, confused. What the hell was he

doing here? She thought. She had chosen this time deliberately to avoid him.

She tried again, "I thought that you'd be here in the evening."

"So, you are trying to avoid me."

Keya came forward and sat on one of the plush sofa chairs, facing him. "Nothing like that," she said breezily. "But didn't you guys have the strict agenda of which one of you will be here, when, etc."

"We did, but since both Sameer and his dad have been spending maximum time with him, it's only fair that they take a break this weekend."

"I'll go in and check on Janak," Keya said getting up before he could say something more pointed about her confused state of mind.

"He's resting now. He just had lunch and has taken his medicines. He'll be asleep for a few hours." Kabier saw her digesting what he'd said. He was sure she was contemplating going back, so he said, "So, you can either go back as you so obviously want to or you can decide to spend the time with me." His words were an open challenge to her.

Keya narrowed her eyes and looked at him. He really was reading her very well. But she wasn't going to be cowed down by his challenge and wouldn't give him the pleasure of knowing that he disturbed her. So she said coolly, "I'll wait."

Kabier smiled inwardly. He finally had her here with him, in private. But he had to be careful how he proceeded with her. One wrong word and she'd be up and gone before he knew it. So he kept quiet, picked up the magazine and started reading it.

Keya sat back down and picked up the newspaper. She was too tightly wound up to read anything, so she decided to concentrate on the crossword. After a while she removed her sandals and tucked her legs under her. She squinted her eyes, thinking about the answer to a clue, extremely frustrated that she couldn't get the answer to this one.

Without thinking she said aloud, "What in the world is a seven letter word for an instrument that measures earthquake intensity."

"Richter," Kabier replied continuing to read the magazine.

"What?"

"The Richter scale, it measures the intensity of earthquakes."

Keya checked her crossword puzzle and it fit perfectly.

"Thanks. That fits."

"You're welcome," Kabier said, still engrossed in his magazine.

Half an hour later, Keya was close to completing the puzzle. She just

had four more clues left. But hell, she just didn't know the answers to the last four. Should she ask him? Well, it was just a puzzle, so what was the harm in asking him for help.

"Uh, Kabier, I need your help."

"Shoot."

"What six letter word was the name of a German general in Hitler's army, otherwise known as the 'Desert Fox'?"

"Rommel... R O M M E L," he replied, spelling it out for her.

"Perfect, three more and I finish the crossword."

She went on to ask him the next three clues and after several minutes of debating on the answers with him, she had completed her crossword. Thanks to him of course.

"Thanks! It's done now."

He just smiled back and asked her, "Do you always do the crossword?"

"I do, when I get the time. But most of the times I manage just half or three fourths of it. I am quite out of touch now. I could finish the whole of it, every single day, at one time." Keya said.

"Wow, how long ago was that?"

"Till college actually. Sheena and Raashi hated it. Sheena was more into outdoor sports like basketball and tennis. Raashi was more into her guitar and I just liked to do the crossword and read my books. It was funny how the three of us hated it when the others spent time on their hobby. It was sort of like taking away each other's time."

"I didn't know Raashi plays the guitar," Kabier said.

"She's excellent. You should hear her sometime. She plays it like a dream."

"Well, Sheena has got her sporting blood from the family, all of us like outdoor sports. We all play many different sports. Basketball, cricket, tennis, you name it. I was excellent at football and cricket myself."

"Really?"

"Yes, played for a club in London while in college, but I gave it up when I joined the business."

"Do you miss it?" Keya asked, interested to know more about him.

"Well yeah, I guess. But different things take priority in your life when you grow up."

That set the note for the rest of the afternoon. It was like they had agreed on a non-verbal truce, each interested in knowing more about the other. They spent time comfortably chatting with each other about their lives. Keya told him stories from her school and college days and he in return filled her with details about his life in London and then in New York.

“I have a penchant for cars, the faster the better and thanks to my wealth, I can afford the best. So I have several.” He went on to tell her about his latest acquisition, the Porsche four wheel drive that he had bought very recently.

“So is it true, that you change women as rapidly as you do your cars?” As soon as the question left her mouth, Keya regretted it, despite being extremely curious to know about the women in his life. So she quickly apologized and said, “That was out of line. You don’t have to answer that.”

Kabier was taken aback by the question. These days she was very cautious regarding what she said around him, but it seemed to him that she had said aloud the one thought that must have been playing in her mind for a while now. He laughed before saying.

“Where did you hear nonsense like that?”

“Come on, all the magazines are always talking about it and Sheena was always telling us stories about her big brother and his multitude of girlfriends.”

“You can’t possibly believe all the stories those gossip magazines write. And Sheena wasn’t privy to my life. My private life has always been private.

But I’ll answer your question. I have many women friends and yes, I’ve had a few girlfriends too, but nowhere close to the way the magazines describe it. Do you think that my busy schedule permits time for even one girlfriend? Forget the many!” He shook his head.

Okay, so he wasn’t seeing anyone right now. Why did that bit of information give her a slight thrill? Keya pondered over that for a moment, and then asked him tongue in cheek, “And was it true that you dumped that Indian Model because she was hinting at marriage?”

Kabier rolled his eyes.

“Not as dramatic as that! We were having some problems in our relationship as we both wanted different things in life. So...”

“Ah! Like marriage, huh?”

She just didn’t give up, did she?

“Yes Keya, like marriage.”

“And you don’t want to get married?” Keya asked him, still prying.

“I have not really thought about it long enough, but yes, someday I will have to get married. My mom’s been after me for a while, as you very well must know through Sheena. Besides, I do want to have children at some point. But not right now. I am just not ready for a family yet.”

“That’s the most chauvinistic thing I have heard in a long time. Which century do you live in?” Keya asked in disbelief. “I can’t believe that you’d marry for that reason alone.”

“Though things around us may have become more liberal, I am not and neither is my family. No child of mine will be born without my name. So I guess that will be the single most important reason that I would want to marry for. All other things like companionship, contentment, even sex can be found from any of the women I know. They would willingly offer these to me and more.”

“So any woman would do for marriage as long as she is fertile enough,” Keya scoffed.

“No, not any woman, she has to have something special to attract me. I’ve just not found her yet. As of now, I am not ready for marriage or any long term relationship of any type.”

Keya kept quiet. He hadn’t mentioned love at all. Probably he didn’t believe in it or he wasn’t the one-woman type, who’d give his heart and soul to a woman. Probably that’s why love didn’t fit in his marriage plans. This conversation had gone way out of hand. She better end it now.

Before she could change the subject Kabier said dryly, “But that’s enough of me, don’t you have a boyfriend tucked around somewhere? No one, that has swept you off your feet yet?”

Ignoring his question Keya told him smilingly, “I’ll go and check on Janak.” She got up and started towards Janak’s room.

He halted her midway, standing in front of her.

“I have answered all the personal questions that you have posed; now it’s your turn. Do you have a boyfriend or not?”

“I am not answering that,” she said serenely, folding her arms and looking directly at him.

“Come on, that’s not fair,” he retorted.

“All’s fair...”

“In love and war, I know,” Kabier completed for her. “And what mode

are we in Keya? Are we making love or are we at war?” he asked her back, extremely serious now.

Keya was stunned by the question. She knew what he was hinting at. He was daring her to accept the situation between them. That the reason they were behaving hot and cold with one another was because of the strong underlying attraction between them. To accept, that this was the reason why she wasn't letting him into her life, or answering private questions about herself.

She saw the flicker of desire in his eyes. Valiantly she tried to break the spell his eyes were casting on her, but she was helpless and could not resist his magnetism. She felt powerless and just could not break the eye contact. His face came down closer and closer to hers. It was close, oh so close.

His eyes saw too much, recognized the hunger she felt for him; recognized the fact that she was trying to deny this pull between them.

His eyes moved to her lips. She felt it like a caress. Her lips throbbed. Time stood still. An eternity passed.

And then Kabier turned and left her standing there rooted to the spot. He went to his grandfather's room, presumably to do the very thing Keya had got up for. Keya watched him go, feeling positively deprived of the kiss that should have happened, but didn't.

Taking a deep breath, shaking herself out of the spell he had wound around her, she followed him to Janak's room.

# Chapter 12

It was as if the ice had melted between them, Keya thought a few days later. The two of them had thawed towards one another, bound by the common concern they shared for his grandfather. None of the other Sehgal family members had returned back to the city. Rishi, she heard was away again for a business trip. He had come back for a day to check on his grandfather and seeing that he was much better had left again. Keya hadn't met him. Raashi was traveling again so Keya spent most of her evenings at Janak's place taking care of him while he was awake and when he was resting she spent time with Kabier who always seemed to be around her.

Kabier observed Keya surreptitiously. They were sitting in the den like they normally did when his grandfather was resting. She was animatedly describing some incident to him and he couldn't stop staring at her. She talked a lot and he loved listening to her. She was always accentuating her statements with hand movements that he found so cute. She was naughty and funny, sharp and witty and oh so lovely. His eyes seemed to follow her whenever she was around.

He focused back on what she was saying and started laughing at the incident she was describing.

Somehow he always seemed to be smiling and laughing around her. Being with her made him forget all the worries and issues that he had to deal with once he was back at work.

To top it all, she genuinely cared for his grandfather. She would discuss his meals with the housekeeper and show him ways of peppering up the bland food that was recommended for his grandfather's recovery. She would insist on spending time with him when he was awake and several times, Kabier would silently watch them talk about various mundane subjects. His grandfather knew most of her friends and would ask her about them or about what she was doing at work. They really had a very nice relationship and he had been so wrong to assume the worst about her. At times when he was quiet, Keya would nudge him and very naturally involve him in the conversation too.

Kabier realized that she was beginning to care for him too. One evening he had been so tired that he had fallen asleep on the couch in the den.



He had woken up with a start to find Keya quietly placing a light blanket on him. She had smiled sweetly at him and he had closed his eyes and gone back to sleep. His heart was warning him that he was getting too attached to her, but he ignored it and let himself enjoy her company.

Keya watched Kabier across the dining table at Janak's place. Sameer had come early and had joined them for dinner. She saw how the two of them conversed easily with one another. Looking at them, no one could imagine they were such successful businessmen. They were so normal and down to earth and right now they were giving each other grief about who was the better football player between the two of them.

Keya couldn't help but smile at the two of them.

Most evenings she was alone with Kabier, since Janak needed to rest and normally Sameer came in late at night. She had learnt so much about Kabier from their time together. They spoke about everything under the sun. Right from sports, to music, to the places he had visited and the people he had met, to the latest books they had read, the latest movies they had enjoyed. At times they would simply play a game of cards to pass their time. He would win by cheating of course and she would get wild at him.

"I always play to win" was his favorite line.

He was fun, very entertaining and ever so charming, Keya thought. She was enjoying herself thoroughly and she loved every minute that she was spending with him.

They hadn't yet discussed the episode that had occurred in Vienna and she had thought that he had accepted the fact that she didn't want to discuss it. Hence, she was surprised when he brought it up one evening when they were alone, talking in the den. Keya was in the middle of explaining why she liked a particular author's style of writing when she caught him staring at her.

"What?" she asked him.

"I am sorry!"

"For what?" Keya asked not understanding him.

"For Vienna! For the way I treated you and what I said to you."

"Kabier, please..."

Before Keya could finish Kabier got up. "Damn it Keya! It's hard for me. I've made the biggest mistake of my life concerning you and you're not making it easy for me. You clam up every time I bring up the subject. So, for once can you please listen to me and let's get this over with."

He paced up and down and turned to face her. "I am extremely sorry,

for my behavior while in Vienna. You didn't deserve it and I need to know that you're going to forgive me. It's important to me, please."

"Kabier, I..." Pausing Keya took a deep breath. "I know now that you really care for your grandfather and that your intentions were good. I was terribly hurt at the time. Thinking about it, even now, makes me blanch. It's tough for me."

"I know. That's why I am asking you to let it go. We've finally established a decent relationship between the two of us and I don't want to lose that. So give me a chance."

Keya shut her eyes for a second and on opening them smiled at him. "Forget it. Let's leave the past behind and move on." She stretched out her hand to him. "To a new beginning?"

Kabier put his hand in her outstretched one and squeezed it tightly. "To a new beginning."

Trisha observed the two of them from a distance. She was having lunch in one of the restaurants located on the Sehgal Corporation's campus. She had only just returned from a business trip and had been stunned to discover the office abuzz with news that something was going on between Kabier and Keya. Everyone was talking about their fantastic camaraderie and what a great pair the two of them made.

After he had left her stranded at the bar, she had been spitting mad that her plan had been ruined. She had tried calling him several times, but he had never picked up her calls or returned them. Only once had he replied to her text message. That too, when she had heard of his grandfather's illness and had passed on her best wishes for a swift recovery to him. She obviously had to keep her plans with him on hold because he was tied up with his grandfather. Then she had been away for a while on a business trip.

Now on her return she could see with her own eyes that something was definitely on between Kabier and Keya. From where she was sitting she could see them lost in a very private conversation. They seemed to have eyes and ears only for each other.

She would have to get Kabier to take her out again soon. In any case he owed her a date after their disastrous one, the last time round. And she would hold him to that for sure. She wasn't going to let Keya get in her way; that she was certain about. Trisha was a master at seduction and persuasion. There was no way Kabier Sehgal would be able to get out, once she had him ensnared.

# Chapter 13

Kabier felt relieved; he felt as though a huge weight had been lifted off him. Finally Keya had forgiven him, sort of, at least. He spent as much as time he could with her, and he could see that they were getting more attuned to each other, understanding one another's moods and emotions. She sought his company when she was having a tough day at work and he did the same.

But now their time alone was coming to an end. It was the last night that Keya and he would be together alone at his grandfather's place before the women in his family returned from London. His grandfather was recovering well and very often he came and sat with them and these days he spent a longer time in their company.

Kabier had to ask her out and take their relationship to the next level. But he wasn't sure if she would agree. In any case he decided to take the risk and went to her office. As usual she was busy working, scribbling some notes on the notepad opened in front of her. Before he could knock, she looked up at him and smiled.

"What's up?" she asked him sitting back in her chair.

"Come out with me tonight. I could ask Sameer to come early and we could go out for dinner."

Though Keya had met him for lunch several times in the past days, it was mostly at restaurants within the office campus. And dinners were normally at Janak's place. This was the first time he was officially asking her out on a date.

In the past few days, there had been several occasions when she had been alone with him, but he hadn't made a move to touch her. A couple of times he had accidentally brushed her hand while playing cards or watching a movie and each time Keya had felt a spark of electricity go searing from her hand to her toes and everywhere else in between. But suddenly yesterday he had changed the status quo.

While arguing about what channel to watch on TV, they had both made a lunge to grab the remote, but she had managed to get her hands on it first. Kabier had tried to grab the remote from her, but she held on to it raising her hand up and down, jiggling it in front of him, but never letting him touch it. Suddenly, he caught her wrist pulled her to him, quickly turning

her so that her back was against his chest and her arm was twisted in a tight but painless grip behind her back.

Instantly she had reacted to his move, her body longing to be closer to him. He had asked her then to release the remote. But she had refused again. Kabier had then pursed his lips and blown a path of air from below her ear right down to the base of her neck and further down her exposed shoulder, deliberately igniting her. In the next instant her body had heated up like a torch. The remote had just dropped to the floor from her hand. He held her like this for a second more, before releasing her. He then bent down and picked up the remote and triumphantly walked back to the TV and had changed the channel to his choice as if nothing of importance had transpired between them.

Even now, just thinking about it made her feel hot and flustered.

Going out with him tonight was not a good idea for sure. Yesterday was too fresh in her mind. She couldn't bear to be alone with him. More likely she wasn't sure if she would be able to control her response if he made a move towards her.

"Not tonight. I have to take care of some things at home."

He looked at her for a moment before asking, "You will be coming to grandfather's place though won't you?"

"Yes, but a bit later than usual."

"You're sure you can't make it for dinner with me?"

"Positive."

Though disappointed Kabier just let it be and didn't push her. She obviously wasn't ready for taking the next step in their growing relationship and he didn't want to spoil anything with her.

He knew she was extremely attracted to him, helpless to control her reaction when he touched her accidentally or like yesterday. She had simply melted against him. It had been so difficult for him to control his reaction to her. The moment he had had her back against his chest, he'd known he was in trouble. Keya was driving him crazy with wanting and he'd go mad if he didn't have her soon. All these days he had avoided touching her, just wanting her to get comfortable around him. Though, he had been sorely tempted several times to kiss her, to touch her, he had kept himself in check. Yet, in spite of the fact that the attraction between them was as strong as ever she was still trying to deny it.

Frustrated now, he simply said, "Okay, I'll see you there then." And

he walked out.

He was looking so disappointed that Keya had half a mind to call him back and tell him that she had changed her mind. But she stopped herself. It was crazy to think like that. She was developing a soft corner for Kabier and that would cause her nothing but trouble.

Just then her phone rang. “Keya, what’s up? Where have you disappeared?” it was Rithwik calling.

“Hey Rithwik, I have been caught up with work and Janak’s illness, that’s all. Both Sheena and Raashi aren’t around so I try and spend the evenings with him.” Rithwik knew very well that Keya and Raashi were extremely close to Sheena’s grandfather.

“Yes, I heard about his illness, how is he doing now?”

“He’s doing very well, in fact.”

“That’s good to hear. Keya, I need a big favor.”

She laughed. “Tell me, Rithwik Bali, how can I be of help?” she teased him.

“I have this huge red carpet awards night to attend tonight and I don’t have a date. I wasn’t planning to attend it initially, but seems like I can’t get out of it.”

“So as usual I am your last minute date?”

“Yes. You know we have a deal,” Rithwik reminded her.

“What happened to this new girl that you have been dating of late?” Keya took the girl’s name.

“Well, you know me, that didn’t last.”

“You’re just impossible,” Keya said laughing.

“I know; so will you come?”

“Can’t you ask someone else?” Keya asked him serious now.

“No. I can’t count on anyone else. Please Keya; you have to agree to come.”

Keya felt extremely guilty, just a while back she’d refused to go out with Kabier and now Rithwik was asking her out and she was finding it difficult to refuse him. He was really a dear friend and she knew he wouldn’t have called unless it was extremely important for him to go. Oh well, she hadn’t met him in a long time, so at least they’d catch up. “Alright, I’ll come. I’ll be at Janak’s place. Fetch me from there.”

“Okay, sounds good. I’ll come up and meet him too, as I haven’t met

him since his illness. I'll see you at half past nine," he said and hung up.

Keya took a great deal of care while dressing up tonight. The red carpet events that Rithwik or Aditya had taken her to in the past were always glitzy and glamorous. The women were always dressed in designer clothes and jewels and she had to look her part as Rithwik's date. She took a luxurious bath, washed her hair and blow dried it till it fell in soft waves around her face and down her shoulders. She applied her favorite lavender lotion on her body and skillfully applied her makeup. She was wearing a silk ivory white gown which was wrapped on one shoulder in a toga style, leaving her other shoulder and both her arms bare. The gown hugged her curves and had a single slit on one side from her knee to her toe. It was simple and classic. It was one of her favorites and she knew she looked good in it. A thick diamond bangle and diamond chandelier earrings added to her allure. She took a diamante clutch in her hands and wore silver heels on her feet.

She reached Janak's place at nine. This gave her half an hour, to be with him and check on his health, before Rithwik arrived. The housekeeper opened the door to her and she entered the den where Sameer and Kabier were sitting, engrossed in conversation.

Sameer saw her first and whistled. "Hi Keya, you look smashing. Hot date tonight?" he teased her.

"Sameer!!" Keya said, wanting him to stop teasing her. His comment had made her feel shy and self-conscious. She saw that Kabier was staring at her, his lips set in a straight line.

"So who's the lucky guy Keya?" Sameer continued, teasing.

Before she could answer Kabier turned to give Sameer a venomous look. Taken aback he just looked from Kabier to Keya and said "Uh, I think grandfather is calling me, I'll just see what he wants." Saying so, he disappeared inside.

Keya wasn't prepared for Kabier to be so angry with her. He came to stand in front of her and said accusingly, his eyes blazing with fury, "You should have just told me you had a date; you didn't need to lie."

"I didn't have a date when you asked me," Keya told him. Part of why Keya had taken such pains to dress tonight was also to see the appreciation in Kabier's eyes, instead he hadn't acknowledged her at all and was plain furious with her.

"In that case, I am not good enough for you to go out with, but this somebody else is?"

“You’re blowing it way out of proportion, Kabier.”

“Not the way I see it.”

“I couldn’t refuse Rithwik, besides I haven’t met him in a long time,” Keya said trying to justify herself.

As soon as he heard that Keya was going out with Rithwik, Kabier went ballistic.

“So let me get this straight,” he hollered. “You could refuse me pretty easily, but not him? What hold does this guy have over you Keya? Or is he the boyfriend that you refused to tell me about?”

She looked at him blankly for a second before saying slowly and firmly, “I am not going to even try and answer that. You can go ahead and think what the hell you like. This conversation is over.”

The bell rang again and Rithwik entered. He saw Keya and Kabier glaring daggers at each other, oblivious to him. He came forward and said, “Hi gorgeous!” and kissed Keya on both her cheeks. He stepped back and took his time appraising her from head to toe and smiled naughtily at her and said, “I like!”

Keya simply smiled at him shaking her head. She knew he was putting on this performance intentionally.

“Ready to go?” he asked her.

He turned around to face Kabier. “Oh, hi Kabier, didn’t expect you to be here.”

Kabier didn’t bother replying back. He was so annoyed. Rithwik actually had the audacity to stare at Keya from top to toe like she was on display, Kabier thought. And the worst was that Keya didn’t seem to notice or rather didn’t seem to mind. Somehow Kabier got the feeling Rithwik was doing it deliberately to irk him. Before he could make sense of that Sameer and Janak entered the den.

“Keya, you look lovely,” Janak said.

Rithwik went forward and shook hands with Janak and Sameer. He asked Janak about his health.

All the while Kabier just stared at Keya, rage written all over his face. Keya in turn just ignored him. He was an arrogant, egoistical pig, she thought. He was back to presuming things about her and she hated that. She had just about forgiven him for the Vienna incident and now he was again hurling accusations at her. Well, he could think what he liked. He didn’t own her and she could very well choose who she wanted to go out with.

Sensing the tension between the two of them Janak said, “Why don’t we all sit down and make ourselves comfortable?”

“Thanks, but some other time. Keya and I have to attend an awards show tonight. Get well soon Mr. Sehgal.” Rithwik said and waved to Sameer and Kabier.

Keya went forward and hugged Janak and asked him to rest. Sameer patted her arm and smiled at her and without giving Kabier a second glance, she left the room.

“Oh well, I need to make some calls,” said Janak. “I’ll make them from my room.”

Sameer started to follow him in, when Janak said, “Stay, I can manage.”

Kabier was still standing at the same spot. Sameer touched his shoulder and said, “From the look on your face, I’d say murder was on your mind.”

“If I get my hands on that guy, I swear I’ll cause him some serious damage,” Kabier roared. “Can you believe I asked her out and she refused? And then she goes out on a date with him? And that man has some gall, appraising her the way he did from top to bottom. I could kill him.”

“So, tell me, why are you so angry?” Sameer asked casually. “She refused to go out with you and went out with Rithwik instead. Big deal, right? And she was looking gorgeous, hell I wanted to look at her from top to bottom. So what if Rithwik thought the same? Tell me cousin of mine, considering the fact that you’re not dating her, why are you so hot and perturbed?”

“Because...” Kabier paused, taking a moment to digest Sameer’s words.

It got him thinking. These last few weeks he had spent every single day with Keya, either at work or here at his grandfather’s place. He had taken it for granted that she spent her evenings with him. Apart from the attraction to her, he had enjoyed her company, enjoyed being with her and having her around him. Just talking to her made him relax.

Seeing her look so stunning, in that white creation she was wearing, and that too, not dressed for him but for someone else had twisted a knife in his heart. Her place was by his side only.

Seeing her walk away with Rithwik right now, had been the toughest thing he had ever done in his entire life. It had opened his eyes to another



very important fact; he wanted her in his life, by his side, forever. He couldn't bear the thought of her with another man. It brought out something primal in him, made him want to destroy something or someone.

And then it dawned on him. It was crystal clear. She was the one woman for him. She was his fate. His destiny. He couldn't deny it any longer. Some of the anger ebbed out of him. Turning to Sameer he simply said, "I am going to marry her!"

"What?" Sameer couldn't believe he had heard Kabier right. He had deliberately asked Kabier those questions, knowing very well that something was going on between Kabier and Keya, something that neither of them had yet accepted. He had observed them, these last few days, when he came late at night and he was sure that they felt more than friendship for each other. But this was way too much. Kabier was actually, finally serious about a woman. This was unbelievable.

"Yes, Sameer, she's mine and I will make her mine. I never ever want to feel what I felt just now when she walked out from here on the arm of another man."

"You've fallen for her, haven't you?" Sameer asked, smiling now.

Kabier nodded, slowly, in acceptance.

"The first thing I am going to do is find out the nature of her relationship with Rithwik Bali and if he is anything more than her friend, God help him!" Kabier said fiercely.

"He's just her friend," his grandfather said from behind him calmly. Kabier turned to see his grandfather standing, leaning on the door to his bedroom, his arms folded.

Obviously he had heard the conversation.

"You can't be sure about that."

"No, I can't, but I am sure of how she feels about you. I may be unwell, but I am not blind. I have seen the two of you, in these last weeks, together. Her eyes never seem to leave you when you're around. I've known Keya for a long time and I've never seen her look at any other man, the way she looks at you. Not even Rithwik."

Kabier smiled, at ease now. His grandfather knew Keya very well and Kabier hoped that he had judged Keya's feelings for him correctly. He was going to face a lot of resistance from her. She had been trying so hard to deny the attraction between them. It was going to be tough to get her to accept it.

But before that he had to find out who was involved with the scam in

his company and why Keya had become the obvious suspect. Yes, a call to Rithwik was definitely in order. He needed to come to an understanding with him.

The next morning Kabier called Rithwik. He picked up the phone in on the first ring.

“Well, well, Kabier Sehgal, what can I do for you?”

“I want to talk to you, about Keya.”

“What about Keya?”

“Let’s meet and then we’ll discuss more.”

“Come over to my office then,” Rithwik said.

“No. We can’t do this at my office or at yours. Let’s meet out of the country, in London. I am going to be there in two days and will be staying there for two weeks. Can you meet me there?”

“I’ll come, mainly out of curiosity, I must say, but why London and not here?”

“Look, I’ll explain everything when we meet. I’ll meet you at the Ritz. Call me when you reach London.”

“Alright, I’ll see you there and Kabier one more thing...”

“What?”

“What in the world did you tell my date last night, that she was so disturbed the entire evening? Keya hardly enjoyed herself and insisted on being dropped home early.”

Smiling to himself, Kabier said, “You’ll understand everything after we meet.” And with this Kabier ended the call. So Keya had been disturbed because of their fight. This was a good sign. It clearly showed that she cared enough about him to be affected. But he’d give her the space to come around. As it is he was scheduled to be in London for two weeks. If she really cared for him like his grandfather said she did then the two weeks away from him would be good for their relationship.

# Chapter 14

The last days had been hell for Keya. She was missing Kabier terribly. Initially she had been so angry with him that she hadn't bothered calling him or meeting him at work like she had been doing the past few days. And since Sheena was back with her mom and aunt, Keya had stopped visiting Janak as well.

When she couldn't take it any longer, she went up to Kabier's office and was informed by his assistant that he was away on business in London and would return only after two weeks.

Oh why had she let this fight continue for so long? She was feeling miserable that she had hurt him. In retrospect, she had understood that he had reacted angrily because he was hurt. Obviously he had assumed that she had chosen Rithwik over him, and Keya had done nothing to change that notion. She had just let her temper get the better of her. And now he was away for two whole weeks.

He hadn't even bothered telling her that he'd be out. She really should have made up with him. His feelings were important and now she would be able to make up with him only when he returned. Explaining to him on the phone just wouldn't be the same.

Keya reflected back on the past weeks. She had bonded so well with him, ever since Janak's illness. She had liked spending time with him. He teased her mischievously at times and at others he would make her laugh at the stories he told her. She enjoyed talking to him. Several times they had argued endlessly about various topics; he had driven her mad with his superior attitude at those times. But she had enjoyed sparring with him and sometimes even besting him.

She has always been hesitant to discuss her past with anyone, but with Kabier she found it easy to talk. She confided in him and told him about her history, about her parents and he had listened quietly and had held her hand. He understood just how difficult talking about it was for her.

She did like him a lot. The best thing that she liked about him was that he was sweet and caring. He would call her up to check how she was doing and many times he'd wait at work for her till she finished and drive her to his grandfather's place.

She missed his presence. Very slowly and subtly he had found the path to her heart. She had begun to care a great deal for Kabier and there was nothing she could do to change that. She just better accept it that he had become important to her.

It was not like she was in love with him, was she? Keya asked herself. No, that couldn't be. Just because she had seen a different side of him these past days, didn't mean that she had allowed herself to fall in love with him. Then why was she suddenly at loose ends now that he wasn't around. She had her former life, didn't she? Her life before Kabier. She just had to get back to doing the things she had done to occupy her time earlier.

But then why was she thinking about him all the time?

No, she was not going to fall in love with Kabier. It wouldn't get her anywhere. When the time came he would probably marry someone from his own background, that too when he was sure that it was time to start a family. She herself, had never thought of marriage up until now and thinking of it she was sure that she wouldn't marry unless she was irrevocably in love and was one hundred per cent sure that she was loved back in the same vein. Only then would she get married.

She couldn't let her feelings for him go out of control.

Kabier met Rithwik a few days before he was to return to India. He was waiting for him at the Ritz as they had decided earlier.

"I am afraid my curiosity is getting the better of me," Rithwik said, as he stood up to shake hands with him.

Kabier sat facing him and got straight to the point. "Do you remember the contract that you won with ACC two years back?"

"Of course, it was a big contract and my company made a lot of money due to it."

"I am sure you know that we had also bid for it and it was a shock to us when you guys won it, considering our history then with ACC."

"So? These things happen all the time," Rithwik said shrugging his shoulders.

"I have reason to believe that someone from my side fed very confidential information to your people that caused you to lower the rates."

Rithwik squinted into the distance, thinking before he said, "We did win that contract, but I wasn't directly involved in it. However, I do know that we have a certain amount of money that we keep aside for situations like this. In any case, what are you trying to tell me?"

Kabier took his time and told him everything. About how Rishi had suspected a scam was involved, about the second lost transaction and how finally the suspicion had fallen on Keya since she was the only woman in his company with access to such information.

“You seriously don’t believe that she gave me the information, do you?” Rithwik asked him stunned at what he had just heard.

“Actually I did, I mean considering your history with her.”

“I don’t believe this. Are you accusing her of outright treachery?” Rithwik asked angrily.

“No, not anymore. I know it wasn’t her,” Kabier said quietly.

“Good, because Keya would never do that. She is extremely dedicated and she has loved working there. I have offered her a job at my company for years now and she has always refused. But, I guess now that she’s leaving you, she’ll probably agree to come and work at Fortuna.”

“That’s not going to happen!” Kabier said forcefully. “I am not going to let her leave. So just forget it, okay.”

“What is going on between the two of you?” Rithwik asked him outright.

“I’ll answer that one in a bit. But before I do, I want to ask you for a favor.”

“What?”

“I need your help to find out who in my company is leaking out information and how they have access to such sensitive information.”

“I could just ask my people who they had paid to get this information,” Rithwik said thoughtfully.

“No, that won’t do. It could be that the person from your company who is paying the source is actually taking a small chunk for himself. Your questioning could scare them off completely.”

“What do you propose?” Rithwik asked.

Kabier outlined a plan. He had thought about it for a while and come up with an obvious solution that needed Rithwik’s help. He described the plan in detail and Rithwik listened to him, asking him a couple of questions of his own.

In the end Kabier asked him, “So, will you help?”

“Yes, you can count me in.”

“But this is strictly between the two of us. No one else, not even Keya can know about it.”

Rithwik nodded.

“This is the reason why I wanted to meet here. Being obvious competitors, a meeting between the two of us would have garnered a whole lot of unnecessary attention that perhaps would have worked against this plan.”

“I get you,” Rithwik said slowly, understanding Kabier’s need for total privacy.

“To answer your question about Keya and me,” Kabier said, “I am going to marry her.”

Rithwik choked on the drink he was sipping when he heard that. Straightening himself, Rithwik asked, “You’re joking right?”

“I am more serious than I have ever been. But, I haven’t asked her yet.”

“Wow, Keya and you. It’s unbelievable. But the fireworks have been there for long, haven’t they?”

Kabier nodded. “I think I was besotted from the first time she literally ran into me. Now I have the tough task of convincing her that she belongs with me. She’s been denying the attraction that she feels for me, since so long now.”

Rithwik smiled looking at Kabier.

“Hey, wait a minute, why was Keya so upset that night I took her out?”

“Because we had a fight just before you entered. I had asked her out the same night and she refused to go out with me and then went out with you instead,” Kabier said, still angry and hurt that she had done that to him.

Some of his feelings were reflected in his tone because Rithwik immediately said, “We’re just friends, Kabier. She is very dear to me as is Raashi. The last two times you saw us together was not usual. I deliberately flirted with her then, knowing very well that you may be interested in her. I was just trying to protect her.”

“From me?” Kabier asked surprised.

“Of course. I could see that you were attracted to her and I didn’t know your intentions then. I just didn’t want her getting hurt.”

Shaking his head Kabier said, “Are you coming for Sheena’s wedding?”

“Of course! Keya’s going to be there as well. And I am definitely not going to miss the fireworks show between the two of you.”

# Chapter 15

Kabier stared into the water splashing gently against the yacht's starboard side. He was leaning against the railing, watching the sun reflected in the water. It was a perfect day for a sail in the yacht. It was lovely, the breeze was blowing gently off the sea and the sun was shining brightly in the sky. He hadn't gone sailing in a long time and Rajiv owned a first class yacht, but naturally, considering Rajiv was in the shipping industry himself. This yacht had all the amenities anyone could possibly need while at sea. The upper deck boasted a luxurious pool along with a Jacuzzi tub. Several lounging chairs were spread around the pool area. The decks below housed the formal dining room that seated eight people and an open air dining room that sat twelve, a comfortable parlor for watching TV or playing video games, an office space and a well-equipped spa. The sleeping quarters comprised of one master and five smaller bedrooms. The entire yacht was fitted with the best furnishings and fixtures that money could buy. It was simply magnificent and he was glad that Sheena was having this impromptu weekend party aboard the yacht.

Sameer came and stood next to him. "Is Rishi here yet?" Kabier turned to ask him.

"Any minute now," Sameer said. Turning to look at Kabier he asked, "Where's Keya?"

"No idea, I am sure she's coming, though," Kabier had been waiting for her.

"So you two haven't yet made up, after the last fight?"

Before Kabier could answer there was a loud screech of tyres next to the pier. Both the men whizzed around and saw a black Hummer that had arrived at the quay, smoke still billowing from its wheels.

"Man, I have got to get me one of these," Sameer said pointing to the Hummer.

The doors of the Hummer opened and Kabier recognized Rithwik exiting the driver's side and Aditya coming from the passenger side of the parked vehicle. Another door opened and he saw a pair of long shapely legs getting out. Curious to see who they belonged to he looked up to see Keya coming out of the car. She was dressed in a short, well-fit, orange halter dress

that ended a few inches below her hips, to expose long creamy legs. The halter exposed a bold amount of cleavage, without being too vulgar. Her hair, left loose was flying against the sea breeze and on her nose were perched the latest trend in designer shades. Her feet were covered in flat white sandals. On her shoulder was a white hold-all bag.

Kabier felt his breath being sucked out of him. He had never seen her wearing something so short ever and he couldn't get his eyes off her legs. Raashi came behind her similarly attired in something short, but he barely noticed. She called out to Keya and Keya turned causing him to gasp, aloud, "What the...?"

The dress barely covered her back and was open from her nape to just above her hips, giving him a perfect view of her well-shaped back and slim waist.

That she would have perfect curves was something he had guessed, but seeing the proof of that with his eyes, was something else. He was feeling hot and uncomfortable just looking at her.

She hadn't seen him yet and he saw the four of them come on board the yacht where Sheena and Rajiv were waiting to greet them.

Kabier could see that Sameer was equally shocked by the bold attire of the two girls. They looked absolutely spectacular.

"Why is it that whenever I see these two guys, they always have the best girls with them?" Sameer asked dryly.

"I agree," Kabier turned to rest his back and elbows against the railing, waiting for Keya to come into his view.

Keya was waiting to meet Kabier. It had been two long weeks without him. She still had to apologize and make up with him. She hoped that he would forgive her and they could go back to being on the same footing that they had been on earlier, prior to their fight. She got on board, greeted Sheena and Rajiv and handed her hold-all to a waiting staff and turned to look for Kabier.

She saw him with Sameer, lounging against the railing, looking breathtakingly gorgeous in dark jeans and a casual white shirt buttoned low on the chest, sunglasses covering his eyes. At that moment she wanted to run to him, she was so happy that he was finally back. She had really missed him and she would make it up to him she promised herself.

She smiled at him and walked forward to where he was standing. But before she could reach him, Trisha walked up to him and casually draped



herself on his arm, leaning towards him, whispering something in his ear. Kabier looked at Trisha and smiled.

Keya halted mid-way in her stride and stood staring at the sight of Kabier and Trisha together. She felt the cold and sharp stab of jealousy pierce through her. She wanted to pull that woman off Kabier and fling her into the water, far away from him. Trisha was so annoying. And why the hell had she been invited here in the first place?

This woman was trouble with a capital T.

The others came behind her and she got pulled along with them towards where Kabier was standing. She just barely managed to say a hi to him, when Sheena pulled her and Raashi aside to show them the yacht.

When they were in the room Sheena said, “Okay girls, officially I am spending the night with you two here, but unofficially, I am spending the night with Rajiv in the master bedroom.”

Raashi and Keya looked at each other surprised. Raashi said, “Sheena, you sly thing!”

“I can’t believe you’d risk it with Kabier and your cousins here,” Keya cautioned.

“Rajiv wouldn’t take no for an answer,” she said giggling. “And it’s the last time we can be together before the wedding. After this weekend, Rajiv’s traveling again and then he’ll be back just in time for the wedding. You two have to take care if a situation arises. And of course my brother and cousins would get real mad if they knew. It’s not okay for me and the twins to have sex before we get married, but for them, the same rules don’t apply. We just have to make sure they never find out,” she said making a face.

“So Sheena, how come Trisha’s here?” Keya asked.

“Kabier’s invited her. I thought they were an item because Kabier has gone out with her a few times recently. But now when I see Kabier with her, I don’t think it’s like that at all. In fact, I am wondering why he even invited her in the first place! But I guess it evens out the numbers, so it’s fine. And since Rithwik, Aditya and you two are also paired equally, I asked Sameer and Rishi to get a date along. So with Rajiv, me, Kabier, Trisha, the four of you and Sameer, Rishi and their dates, it makes us twelve. Perfect for a weekend yacht party.”

Keya was quiet, thinking over what Sheena had said about Kabier and Trisha. She had seen Kabier put his arm around Trisha that night, when he had taken her out on a date from Janak’s place. But after that she had never

heard him speak of her or even speak to her on the phone, at least not when she was around. Even at work she had never seen them together. But that could mean anything either ways, she thought. She could ask him the next time they spoke. Well, that is after they started talking to each other again. She rolled her eyes. He was still upset with her. She could feel it. He hadn't smiled at her once.

Suddenly the boat's engines came to life.

"Looks like Rishi's here. We were waiting for him to arrive to set sail. Come on. Let's go join the others." Sheena said.

Kabier was chatting with his cousins when he saw Keya return back on the deck. He had missed her so much. The only time he had spoken to her in the last two weeks was when she had called him regarding work. They had been formal calls with nothing of their earlier camaraderie reflected in them.

He still wasn't sure what was going on in that head of hers. He had noticed her face light up in a bright smile when she first saw him. But the moment she saw Trisha, she had stopped midway in her stride and had stood gawking at the two of them. Kabier was sure that the two women did not like each other, but what he was even more certain was that Keya didn't like the other woman around him. Though her eyes had been covered with sunglasses, he couldn't mistake the way her chin had jutted out defiantly when Trisha had wound her arm through his. This was another sign that showed she cared more than she was ready to admit.

Now, she was standing, quietly observing the crowd with Raashi. He was sorely tempted to go up to her. But he kept his emotions in check. She had to care enough to understand that he had been hurt that last time, to take the step forward and come and make up with him.

"Why did Sheena ask me to get a date when these two lovely girls are here?"

Rishi's words interrupted his thoughts. Rishi turned to look at Keya and Raashi and Kabier saw him giving them the once over. He hadn't yet told him about his intentions towards Keya.

Rishi, being the incorrigible flirt that he always was, said, "And the two of you are definitely not interested in them, else I would have known, right? So I plan to make myself scarce from here and brandish my charm on those two gorgeous babes." Before either Kabier or Sameer could caution him, he was off.

Keya reached the pool deck with Raashi. The two of them stood

silently looking at the assorted gathering. Sheena and Rajiv stood together chatting with Rithwik and Aditya. Trisha had made herself comfortable on a reclining lounge with two other girls. The three of them were already giggling like school girls. All of them were dressed in similar attire of crop tops, teamed with shorts or mini-skirts.

Kabier was standing in another corner with Sameer and Rishi. Sameer was dressed in jeans and a shirt similar to Kabier's. But Rishi was dressed only in low waist, beige, casual linen shorts that fell to his knees and showed off his designer boxers at his waist. He was superbly built and his tanned bare chest exhibited that to perfection. She knew Kabier and Sameer were staid in appearance and in nature, while Rishi was the wilder one.

She had met him once, she couldn't remember how long ago. He looked similar to his brother and cousin.

The three of them standing there exuded an aura that would make anybody take a second look. They were all tall, with similar features that marked them as being closely related.

Rishi had turned to look at her and Raashi. He gave them a very obvious and thorough once over before giving them an impish wink. He whispered something to his brother and Kabier and sauntered casually towards them.

"Hi! I think I've met you lovely ladies before," he said with a grin.

"Hi Rishi!" Keya acknowledged him. Raashi raised her hand up casually to acknowledge him.

He looked from her to Raashi and then back. "Sorry, but though I remember faces, especially beautiful ones, I am extremely bad with names," he said making a face.

Keya liked him instantly. She laughed. "I am Keya and this is Raashi," she said pointing to Raashi.

"Yeah right, Sheena's best friends. Boy, have you two grown since I saw you last," he said appraising them again playfully.

"And you Rishi have only just remembered us," Raashi said, smiling. "Sheena's told us what a flirt you are and you have just proved her right."

"Who me? A flirt?" he asked, putting his hand on his chest and pretending to be hurt. At which Raashi and Keya just burst out laughing.

"How does that little brother of mine, always find the right things to say to women? Look, he has them eating out of his hand already," Sameer said in disbelief looking at Raashi and Keya laughing at something Rishi was

saying.

“That guy is definitely a charmer,” Kabier said looking at Rishi affectionately.

“Kabier, you have to tell him, you know.”

“I know. I will. That is, as soon as I get him away from Keya long enough.” Kabier noted that Rishi was guiding the two girls now to a couple of loungers. Keya made herself comfortable in a lounge and stretched her legs out in front of her. Raashi did the same in another one. Rishi sat beside Raashi and looked at her with an appreciative glance.

Sameer saw him and shook his head. “I think I’ll go and check what he is up to.” And he went off to where Rishi was sitting with Keya and Raashi. Left by himself Kabier observed the four of them enjoy each other’s company. In the next few minutes, Sheena, Rajiv, Rithwik and Aditya also went up to join them.

Seeing their dates busy with Raashi and Keya, the two girls who had come as Sameer and Rishi’s dates left Trisha and went up to join the bigger group. He could see Rishi introducing Keya and Raashi to the two girls.

Trisha came up to Kabier and commented, “She does manage to draw a crowd around her, doesn’t she?” She was obviously talking about Keya.

“Why don’t you like her?” Kabier asked.

“I dislike her attitude. She always gets what she wants. She is very pushy and cut throat. She doesn’t want to lose ever and will overrule anyone who disagrees with her line of thinking. In short, we’ve never seen eye to eye.”

Kabier listened to Trisha describing Keya. He had observed her at work and she was exactly like that. But, personally he didn’t think they were bad traits. In fact these were probably what made her so successful.

Aloud he said, “Well, I guess that’s her mantra for success.”

“Her mantra for success could also be that she may be discreetly involved with the top boss, which I know you don’t agree. But I still have my doubts.”

“Keya is successful because of her own hard work.” Kabier was angry now. “And yes she is close to my grandfather but not in the way you think. This rumor is just the work of a dirty mind. And for the last time Trisha, I never ever want to hear that statement again.” Saying so he walked off, leaving her standing staring behind him.

He shouldn’t have invited her to come. He had regretted it the moment

he had asked her, but then she was an old friend and he owed her. He had left her in the bar without a word of explanation, when Keya had called him, informing him about his grandfather. She hadn't deserved that and even afterwards he had gotten so busy looking after his grandfather and spending time with Keya that he had forgotten about her completely. She had called him last week when he was in London, upset with him for treating her this way. Sheena had just called him before that to tell him about the yacht party and he had invited her to it, simply to appease her. But now she was back to saying nasty things about Keya. And he didn't like it one bit.

The moment Keya saw Trisha go up to where Kabier was standing, she lost all interest in the conversation flowing about her. Her attention was riveted on the two of them. Something Trisha had said had caused Kabier to react angrily. He hadn't raised his voice at all, but she knew him well enough to understand from his body language that he was upset.

"Keya, you didn't answer my question?" Keya jerked back to look at Rishi, who was still waiting for her to reply to something he had asked.

"I am sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

"Well, you were quite obviously distracted," he said following the direction of her eyes. He frowned when he saw that she was watching Kabier standing alone, a little distance away.

"Sorry, I'll be back in a moment."

Saying so, Keya got up from where she was sitting and went up to Kabier.

"Hi," she said, and went across to stand next to him.

"Hi yourself," he replied, looking at her briefly. Then he looked away.

"You're still upset with me, aren't you?" He just looked at her and didn't say anything.

"Alright, I am sorry!"

"For what?" He wasn't going to make it easy for her, Keya thought.

"For refusing to go out with you, and then, going out with Rithwik."

He didn't respond. He just stood there silently watching her.

"He's just a friend, a very good friend. I couldn't refuse him. I just couldn't," Keya said justifying herself.

"And you could refuse me, why Keya?"

She didn't know what to reply to that. How could she tell him, that her feelings for him ran far deeper than the attraction she felt for him. That she had run scared at the prospect of being alone with him and had found the

cowards way out.

Not getting any answer Kabier said, “No more games Keya, time to face reality. And the reality is that we are very attracted to each other. During the last weeks that we have spent together, the two of us have tried to avoid the evident attraction that we have felt for one other. But we didn’t succeed at all. You were scared. Scared of how you’d react to me when we were alone together. That is the sole reason you didn’t want to go out with me that night. Isn’t it?”

“Kabier, don’t. Please, don’t talk like that.”

“Why? It is the truth. And I for one am not afraid to accept that I want you in my arms and in my bed, writhing beneath me in pleasure when I make the most unforgettable love to you,” he told her plainly.

Keya shivered at the picture that he painted. She was feeling flushed just hearing him.

“I have wanted you from the first time you bumped into me in the corridor. Even in Vienna, I would have made love to you; if I hadn’t had any misconceptions about you then. And you would have let me.”

Keya shook her head to deny it. But before she could say one word he said, “Deny it all you like, but you feel for me as strongly as I feel for you.”

Without warning, uncaring that they were surrounded by people, he caressed her with his index finger, right from her bare shoulder, down her bare arm, down to the tip of her middle finger.

Keya felt the heat from his finger, lighting a path of fire wherever it touched her.

She hadn’t moved her eyes away from his face. She was trying to resist him, but she couldn’t and he saw the exact moment when she couldn’t mask her reaction to him anymore. He saw it in her eyes as they clouded with longing.

He stopped then. Keya gasped, missing his touch. Kabier put his hands in his denim pockets and gave her a pointed look.

“Either you accept this insane magnetism that we feel or we just go back to being work colleagues and social acquaintances. Because, I can’t, anymore bear to be around you and not be able to touch you. The ball is in your court. I’ll accept whatever decision you make.”

With that he walked away from her and went below. Keya was still standing shell shocked at what he had said; to what he had proved.

She was stunned.

Her thoughts were in turmoil. She knew she hadn't been able to control her desire for him. It had risen up like a flame, the moment he had started caressing her. She had to think, she needed time to be alone to think this through. Kabier had given her an ultimatum. If she accepted their mutual desire, then she would end up in bed with him. He was crystal clear about that. And if she didn't then he would treat her indifferently, like there was nothing between them. She was so confused now. One part of her just wanted to run as far as possible from this potentially dangerous situation between them. To just leave it and continue living as if nothing had ever happened between them.

But the other part of her wanted to run to him and tell him that she wanted him, as much as he wanted her. She had to make a choice soon.

# Chapter 16

Lunch was on one of the open aired decks. It was a sit down affair and Keya was conspicuous by her absence. Her chair was vacant. Kabier had been informed by Sheena that Keya had a headache. He smiled inwardly. Well, he had given her a lot to think about and he hoped that she would respond in a way that he hoped for.

Trisha had come to him and apologized for her comments. He just let it be and didn't take it any further. After all he had invited her here, so he had to ensure that she had a good time as well. And everyone was entitled to their own opinion he thought. So he just smiled and brushed it all off. She kept him company throughout lunch. He communicated with her easily and succeeded in making her feel comfortable again.

Raashi came back to the room late evening, after a swim and found Keya fast sleep. She had slept through the afternoon and into the evening. After taking a bath and changing for dinner, she gently patted Keya awake.

"What time is it?" Keya asked, stretching and rubbing her eyes.

"It's almost seven."

"My, I must have slept for hours."

"You did seem pretty disturbed earlier."

Ignoring her friend's subtle inquisition Keya asked, "Did you swim?"

"Uh huh!"

"And was everyone there?" Keya asked, curious to know what Kabier had been doing.

Raashi smiled at her, pointedly, knowing where her question was leading. "Except for you, everybody was there. Sheena and Rajiv were lost in their own world, as usual. Trisha was wearing an absolutely nonexistent bikini and would drape herself around Kabier every opportunity she got. Come to think of it, the girls with Sameer and Rishi were also were dressed in tiny bikinis that displayed their abundant bounty." Raashi made a face.

"Ugh!"

Trisha was one of the most infuriating women Keya had ever come across. And now she was throwing herself at Kabier, Keya thought. She hated the thought of that woman anywhere near him.

But she herself was not around him either, she told herself. He had



asked her a question and instead of coming to a conclusion on that, she had just fallen asleep. And if she decided to stay away from him, then she would have to accept women like Trisha in his life.

Raashi continued, interrupting her thoughts, "The three of them were making a play for all those guys. Can you believe that even Rithwik and Aditya couldn't take their eyes off them?" Raashi rolled her eyes before continuing.

"Anyway, Sameer and Kabier were mostly indifferent to the girls. The two of them spent most of their time together. Rishi, Rithwik and Aditya were plainly enjoying themselves."

This was interesting Keya thought. So, Kabier wasn't interested in what Trisha had to offer. This meant that he was quite serious about what he had said to Keya. But that was Kabier. He wouldn't say anything unless he didn't mean it. Oh, she was so glad that he had stayed away from that woman.

"Well," Raashi said, "It's time for dinner, why don't you get dressed and meet me on the deck?"

Kabier hadn't seen Keya since their last conversation and he wondered if she was avoiding him. When she hadn't turned up for a swim, he asked Raashi about her and she'd told him that she was fast asleep. Kabier didn't know what to make of it. He had been waiting for her to come to him with her decision for hours, and the waiting was making him restless and edgy.

He had been aware that Trisha was trying to grab his attention and was clinging to him every opportunity she got. Somehow she had gotten the wrong idea that something could ever happen between them. He needed to tell her soon that he wasn't interested in her in that way. She was just a friend to him and nothing else.

Now it was late evening and still Keya had to make an appearance. Rithwik came to his side and said, "I see you two haven't made up yet?" he asked referring to him and Keya.

"No, we haven't, but we will. I have missed her a lot, these past two weeks."

Rithwik looked at Kabier and laughed. "Well, well, how the mighty have fallen. I never expected I'd see the day when Kabier Sehgal would feel like that about a woman."

"Don't laugh at me; wait till your turn comes."

"No, I am never going to be in this situation. It's not for me. I am

happy just the way I am. Single and always more than ready to mingle.” Rithwik said the last statement very slowly, looking appreciatively at Trisha and the two girls who had just entered.

Kabier looked at where he was gazing and started laughing.

Everyone had already gathered on the deck when Keya arrived. Looking around she had to admit that it was done up beautifully. She was very impressed with the arrangements. Dinner was on the open air deck adjacent to the parlor. The area had been cleared and a buffet was laid out on the side, light music was drifting out of hidden speakers. The only light on deck came from the small lanterns that were hung everywhere. These added a warm and ethereal feeling to the ambience. She looked up to see Kabier standing across from her and her heart skipped a beat. He looked good as usual. His clothes had a casual chic to them and his short hair was spiked back a bit, adding to his appeal. He was sharing a laugh with Rithwik. She frowned. Since when had these two become friends, she thought.

In another corner a DJ console was set up. Rishi was standing on the console, headphones on his ears and he spoke into the mike. “Alright people let’s get this party rocking.” Immediately he changed the tempo of the music to a latest hot and happening number. Sheena took to the dance floor with Rajiv and Keya saw Sameer ignore his date and ask Raashi for a dance. Rithwik came on the floor with Trisha on his arm and soon Kabier and Keya were the only ones left standing.

Kabier saw Keya across the deck from him. She looked at him uncertainly for a minute, as if deciding what to do, then making up her mind, she walked towards him. She had changed into a bright blue strapless dress that flowed down to her feet. Her hair was tied into a top knot and Kabier itched to remove her pins and let her hair flow loose and natural. As she came to stand close next to him, he could smell the soft perfume she was wearing and it played havoc on his senses.

“Seems like the two of us are the only ones standing, wanna dance?” Keya asked him warily.

“Have you decided on what course you want to take our relationship?” he countered back.

“Not yet.”

“Then its best that you decide what you want before we do anything else together, including talking to each other.” And with that he walked off to where Rishi was standing in the DJ console.

Keya took a deep breath. He was making it extremely tough for her to decide. And he was making it obvious about how he would behave with her if she chose to ignore their blatant attraction towards one another.

Aditya came to her, interrupting her line of thought and pulled her in for a dance. She joined him, swaying to the music.

Dinner was a noisy affair; everyone had been drinking so the noise levels were high. Thankfully the music volume had been lowered so at least she could hear what everyone around her was saying. In any case with the turmoil going on in her mind, Keya had to pay extra attention to what was being said to her.

Her mind kept drifting back to her decision and her eyes kept straying to Kabier. She had noticed that he hadn't danced the entire evening even though Trisha had tried to convince him several times, but each time he had refused. Now she saw that he was chatting with Sameer and Raashi.

She saw Trisha once again come towards where Kabier was standing with Sameer and Raashi. Just when she was in touching distance of him, Keya saw her slip, deliberately. Trisha yelled and before she could touch the ground, Kabier had caught her waist and held her close. She was whimpering now, in pain, tears in her eyes.

God, either the woman was a consummate actress or she had indeed hurt herself. Keya shook her head. No! She had seen her deliberately fall. She saw her try and take a step forward and then yell again in agony. In the next instant, Kabier had gathered her in his arms and was carrying her inside, much to Keya's chagrin.

Raashi came up to her and whispered, "Did you see that, she made it all up, I saw it. She was standing across me, in plain sight. I saw her deliberately fall."

"I know; I saw her too."

"That woman is dangerous."

"Come on! Let's go in to see what she's up to,"

Keya entered the parlor and found Trisha and Kabier sitting on one of the leather couches. Trisha was wearing a short dress and her leg was up on the table in front of her. Sameer was holding her injured foot, trying to judge the level of pain and damage. As he twisted her foot gently to assess the hurt, she screamed and put her arms around Kabier's neck and buried her face in his shoulder. Kabier just calmly held her in his arms and whispered words in her ear.

Keya felt as if a tight rope had been wound around her chest, making it difficult to breathe. Seeing Kabier, his arms around another woman, jolted her and brought to mind an important fact, one that she had been denying for a while.

She was in love with Kabier. She was crazily, irrevocably, in love with him. That was the only explanation for why she was having difficulty breathing now.

Keya sat down on one of the sofas suddenly. Oh God! How had she let that happen? When had she let him into her heart? Why of all the people in the world, had she chosen to fall in love with Kabier? So many questions were raising their head. And she had no answers for any of them. He had ever so easily opened the door to her heart and then simply walked in.

That he wanted her was obvious, but he hadn't spoken about love even once. Suddenly the scales had tilted.

She had to decide whether she should risk her heart and have an affair with him as he plainly wanted or forget about him forever. The latter choice made her feel bereft even as she thought of it.

No, the better option would be to have an affair with him, at least this way she could try and make him fall in love with her. Her mind made up, she turned back to see how the drama was unfolding in front of her.

After several minutes, Keya saw that Trisha had calmed down. She even claimed that her foot was better and she could even move it slightly. Sameer rubbed an ointment on her foot and gave her some painkillers. But, Trisha still clung to Kabier like a creeper, pushing her body into him, hugging him close. Keya made a face looking at her. She was really livid with this woman's behavior.

Kabier saw Keya's expression and quietly and firmly removed Trisha's clinging arms from around his neck and with a nod of his head asked Rishi to take over. He got up, and spoke to Sameer instead.

# Chapter 17

Everyone had settled down on the various couches and chairs that dotted the parlor. Rajiv entered with a bottle of tequila, one of his crew members followed him in with a tray that carried tequila glasses and the customary lime slices and salt that went with the drink and placed it on a table in the corner.

Rajiv was announcing that all of them would need to have at least one tequila shot to start with, when Rishi being wild as usual said, “I have a better idea. Let’s play the tequila version of spin the bottle.”

“No way,” Sameer and Kabier said together, obviously knowing what he was talking about.

“What is that?” Sheena asked.

Rishi continued, “You all know what spin the bottle is, but this is with slightly different rules. It’s called Drink or Dare.”

“So, what are the rules?” Sheena asked cheekily, very curious; more so since both Kabier and Sameer were not for it.

“Everyone takes a turn to spin the bottle. When the bottle stops spinning, its mouth points at one person and its base points to the other. These two will play Drink or Dare. Meaning that the person where the mouth of the bottle stops is the ‘chosen one’, who will either drink a shot of tequila or do a dare. If a dare is chosen, it means that he/she would have to play a forfeit chosen by the other person.”

“Sounds good, what do the others say?” Sheena asked.

Amid sounds of yes and sure, Sameer looked at Kabier and shook his head. He knew how wild this game could get. Kabier looked at Sheena and said, “No, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Oh come on Kabier. You two are just being spoilsports. Everyone else wants to play.”

Kabier looked from her to Raashi and Keya. “What about you two?”

Raashi shrugged her shoulders. Keya wondered why he was making such a fuss over it. “I don’t mind. Let’s play.”

“I thought you didn’t like tequila.”

Surprised that he knew that, Keya replied back, “I don’t, but the game sounds fun.”

“There are you satisfied now, big brother? So, are you and Sameer going to play with us or not?” asked Sheena.

“We’ll play,” Sameer answered.

Rishi obviously enjoying himself said, “Some more rules, the turn is played only if the bottle stops in front of opposite genders. So two girls or two guys are not allowed to play.

Also if someone chooses a dare and then refuses to do the forfeit, then you’ll have two drinks, meaning two tequila shots at a time.

And finally, if you choose to drink, then you have to rub salt on any exposed part of the other person’s body and lick the salt from there, before you down the drink.”

“That’s so cool,” said Sheena naughtily.

“So if everyone has understood, let’s play.”

Since Trisha was in pain, they chose to sit around the sofa in a circle. Trisha sat in between Rishi and Aditya and the rest of the crowd sat around on the floor. Rishi started the game. He spun the bottle. After a couple of spins the mouth of the bottle came to rest on Keya and its base on Rishi. He gave her a wink and asked her, “Drink or Dare?”

“Drink.” Keya smiled at him.

He stepped aside from the circle and took a glass of tequila and handed it to Keya.

She picked up a slice of lime from the table and a pinch of salt.

Wickedly he asked her, “So where are you going to lick me, Keya?”

Kabier who had heard the comment whispered to Sameer sitting next to him, “I swear, I am going to punch his face when I meet him in private.”

Laughing, she took one circle around him, looking at him from head to toe before she stopped in front of him, took his palm, rubbed the salt on its base, licked it and downed the glass of tequila and finally sucked on the lime. Everyone erupted in cheers, laughing and clapping. Rishi looked at her, pretending to be hurt and thumped his heart with his fist and shook his head.

Keya touched his cheek mischievously and said, “Next time, something better huh?” and she winked at him.

Kabier couldn’t help laughing. She had beaten his cousin at his own game and brought him down a notch or two. He was proud of her.

The game continued. The next turn was Rithwik’s and Sheena’s. Sheena was the chosen one and like Keya she licked the salt off Rithwik’s palm and then downed her drink.

When the bottle stopped in front of Raashi and Rishi, Rishi being the chosen one, chose a dare. There were various comments from all around of what forfeit to give him and being mischievous Raashi asked him to do a strip tease on a song; which he did with much gusto. As the music played he gyrated his hips in front of her and slowly stripped off his shirt, showing his chest and pretended to bump his hip against her and then stood behind her and then in front, all the time dancing like a strip club dancer would. Finally he stopped. There was more clapping and cheers.

“And I swear I am going to help you punch him. This brother of mine has gone completely out of hand.” Sameer told Kabier after seeing the raunchy dance performed by his brother.

So it continued; the forfeits given ranged from strumming a guitar like a rock star without music to a guy doing a belly dance, to telling the names of all their past boyfriends. This last one was done by Sameer’s date and she said the names of at least five men, much to his disgust, Keya thought from the expression on his face.

For the drink part, someone licked salt of someone else’s ankles, knees, feet, fingers. Rajiv licked salt off Sheena’s nape the first time and the next off her lips. Then Rishi sucked the salt of his date’s bare shoulder. The game was getting wilder.

Keya had so far been the chosen one twice and both times she had chosen to drink. There was no way that she could have any more of this drink. As it is she wasn’t fond of it. Kabier so far had also had two, she counted to herself.

When Trisha’s turn came, she was paired with Kabier. But everyone said that since she was on medication she couldn’t drink so she had to choose a dare. Caught in a spot she had no choice but to choose a dare. He simply asked her to sing a song; which she did, albeit, reluctantly. Keya was sure that had Trisha known that they would be playing a game like this, she wouldn’t have pretended to fall. Good, served her right, she thought.

Keya saw that Sheena was feeling quite high now. She had downed some three shots and Rajiv insisted that she get to bed. Kabier got up to help him but Rajiv said that he’d take care of her and to please continue. Kabier reluctantly let them go. The guy was marrying his sister in two weeks, so it was his right to look after her now anyway.

As he returned to his seat, he heard Trisha call out to him.

“Kabier, my foot hurts. Can you help me to my room?” Trisha raised

her hand out to him.

Keya watched in disbelief and irritation as Trisha tried another ploy, this time to obviously get Kabier alone with her. She saw as Kabier raised Trisha to her feet and she swayed. But before she could lose balance Kabier had caught hold of her waist and held her to him. Trisha put her arm around him and rested her head on his shoulder.

Keya wanted to throw something at her. The woman could win an acting award with her performance.

“Keya you’re hurting me,” Rithwik said from beside her.

She jerked her attention back to Rithwik, confused. When he pointed to his arm, she realized that she was holding on to his arm tight, her finger nails digging into his skin thanks to the death grip she had on him.

She released her hold on him and apologized. Rithwik looked from her to Kabier and back to her.

“You two definitely need to sort out your issues,” he whispered to her, shaking his head. He stood up, “Kabier, wait. I need something from my room, so why don’t I escort Trisha to her room instead.”

Keya saw that even before Trisha could voice her protest, Rithwik had taken hold of her and was escorting her out of the room. She breathed a sigh of deep relief when Kabier sat back and the game continued. Obviously Rithwik had read her feelings for Kabier and she would have to speak with him soon. But right now she was so thrilled that he had understood her anxiety and sorted out the situation for her.

The next couple to play was Raashi and Sameer. This time Sameer was the chosen one. He chose to drink. He picked up his glass, slice of lime and the salt and looking at Raashi carefully circled her once and then went behind her the second time. This time he moved her hair to one side and rubbed the salt at the side of her neck, just above her bare shoulder.

“No,” Raashi blurted out in surprise, turning sideways to look at him.

“The rules state that I choose which part of your body I get to lick the salt from and I choose this,” Sameer replied, calmly.

Without waiting for her reaction, he bent his head and sucked on the salt on her neck. He continued for a second longer and then downed his drink before sucking on the lime. Raashi just stared at him like he’d lost his mind. Keya could see that Raashi was clearly shocked. It took her a moment to digest what he’d done before she returned to her place, by Keya’s side. Keya looked at her and could see that she was pretty disturbed. But she maintained



an outward calm, as if nothing had happened, and rejoined the game.

“What did you do that for?” Kabier asked Sameer when he came to sit by him.

“It was just too tempting.”

“That’s it?”

“Uh huh!”

“How many have you had to drink?” Kabier asked him.

“Three, counting this one, plus the two vodkas I had earlier in the party.”

“You’re crazy,” Kabier told him and pulled his attention back to the game.

After a few more turns of the bottle, Kabier finally said, “Enough. It’s late and we should call it a night.” To which he got a lot of boos from the crowd which had grown even wilder.

“OK. Two more spins and I am out of here.”

The bottle spun and stopped. Its mouth rested on Keya and its base on Kabier. He stared at her silently before getting up to stand. Keya stood up too and faced him. Thinking for a moment Kabier asked her pointedly, “What will it be Keya? Do you want a drink or do you dare to take a forfeit from me?”

Keya recognized the challenge in his eyes, understood that he was asking her for an answer now. In front of all these people he was subtly asking her if she was ready to step into the unknown with him. Did she dare to do that?

Making up her mind she replied slowly, “I take the dare,” giving him the answer that he so desperately wanted to hear.

His mouth curved into a slight smile. Looking straight into her eyes, Kabier said, “In that case, I want a kiss.”

The way he said it, not one person in the room doubted what kind of a kiss he expected from Keya.

“What?” Sameer and Rishi said together, clearly bewildered by the dare. They had done a lot of wild things tonight, but none as bold or shocking as this.

Raashi simply put her hand on her mouth, equally shocked. Aditya looked at Rithwik confused. Rithwik just shook his head. There was pin drop silence all around. Everyone looked from Kabier to Keya, waiting to see what she would say or do next.

Keya couldn't believe that she'd heard him right. He wanted proof. He wanted her to prove in front of all these people that she was ready; ready to take the next step in their relationship.

Looking back into his eyes, Keya walked up to him. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, looking at her expectantly. She stepped closer to him, put her hands around his neck and stood on tip toe. She stared at him for a second, directly into his eyes and then moved his head down with her hands and brought his lips down on hers. She had intended to give him a slight peck on the lips, but the minute his lips touched hers, she was lost, oblivious to the fact that there was a whole room of people staring at them.

She kissed him thirstily, like someone in the desert who had found their oasis. She put all the emotion and love she felt for him into the kiss. Showing him that she wanted him, accepting that what they had together was dynamite and she wasn't going to deny it any more.

And then he responded. His hands caught her waist and he held her to him, hungrily kissing her. It was like he had waited eagerly for this moment all his life and he had. He pressed her mouth open with his tongue and she didn't resist. He entered her mouth and stroked her tongue with his, licking her lips, sucking them and then delved inside her mouth once again; his tongue dancing with hers.

Rishi looked at the couple wildly kissing one another in disbelief. He turned to look at Sameer, who just returned his look calmly with a knowing look of his own.

Rishi mouthed, "You knew." Sameer nodded and looked away. Kabier owed him an explanation, big time, from the look of what he was witnessing right now, Rishi thought.

Reality returned.

Kabier was the first to comprehend that there was silence all around them and seven faces were gaping open mouthed at them. He had wanted her to prove that she had indeed accepted him and she had. He didn't want to stop kissing her, but now was not the time. Giving her a last peck on the lips, his senses still in frenzy, he slowly extracted his mouth from hers.

Keya was still in a daze, her wits spinning, still out of control. She felt that the earth had moved from its axis. That she no longer had control of her carefully built world. She went back and sat next to Raashi in a daze. Rithwik was the first to break the silent spell. He hooted, cheered and clapped, which was then taken up by everyone else.

“I don’t believe you just did that,” Raashi told her when she took her seat next to her.

“Me neither,” Keya replied.

“Sheena would have freaked had she been here.”

“Then it’s good that she wasn’t.”

Raashi watched her intently. “We’ll talk later.”

Kabier resumed his place next to Sameer who looked at him in disbelief. “And you call me crazy. What the hell was that?”

“What can I say? It was just too tempting,” Kabier replied back with a wide grin, parroting Sameer’s own answer.

Kabier turned and saw Rishi staring at him, his mouth set in a straight line. Kabier finally mouthed to him, “Later,” which got him to say, “You bet!” There was a final spin and a final drinking of tequila before everyone called it a night and retired to their respective rooms.

## Chapter 18

As soon as they returned to their room, Raashi shut the door and looked at her accusingly. “What got into you back there?”

Keya just shrugged her shoulders.

“Keya stop behaving nonchalant about it.”

“It was just a kiss, relax Raashi.”

“That wasn’t just a kiss. It was scorching. The two of you heated the room back there.”

Keya smiled at her in reply.

Raashi shook her head. “I’ve seen how he looks at you and I know that you feel something for him. Why did you rise up to his challenge?”

“Come on Raashi, it was just a game. That’s it, okay?”

“I don’t know what you’re up to Keya, but you better be careful.”

Changing the subject Keya asked her, “You tell me, what is up with Sameer and you?”

Immediately Keya felt Raashi tense up. “Nothing.”

“Oh really, then what was that he did on your neck? Don’t tell me that you weren’t affected by it, because it was quite plain to me that you were.”

“I don’t know why he did that, honest Keya. It was crazy. When his lips touched my skin, I felt I was on fire.” Raashi said honestly, shivering at the memory.

Keya smiled. Something was going on between these two. She’d keep a better watch the next time she saw them together. Providing she got her mind off Kabier long enough to concentrate somewhere else, her mind told her.

They decided to call it a night. But each one of them was lost in their own thoughts. Keya replayed her conversation with her friend. For the first time in years, she hadn’t confided in Raashi. But this was different. It was difficult for her. Her feelings for Kabier were too new even for her and she didn’t want to complicate things by involving Raashi. She didn’t want to hear anything negative about her decision to be with Kabier. She wanted to see where this relationship with him went and she wanted to risk it.

Keya tossed and turned several times, before getting out of the bed.

“Where are you going?” Raashi asked her.

“I think I will go and swim for a while or take a dip in the Jacuzzi. I am feeling wide awake.” Keya changed into her red and blue striped two piece swim suit, wore a matching red shirt on top of it and left the room.

Rishi was waiting for Kabier in the room. The minute Sameer and he entered he launched off at Kabier, “What the hell was that about?” And before Kabier could even try and get a word in edgewise he turned to Sameer. “And you knew? Mind telling me what’s going on and why I haven’t been kept in the loop?”

Kabier had always been close to his cousins and they knew everything important that happened in each other’s lives.

“Calm down Rishi,” Sameer told his brother.

“Kabier was devouring that girl out there, in front of so many of us. I don’t recall him behaving like this ever. Not even while he was with that model, whatever her name was. The two of you are the most private people I know of. This public display is more my style, not yours and certainly not Kabier’s. So, don’t expect me to calm down, until one of you tells me what’s going on. And please, I want the long version and not the short one.”

Kabier took a deep breath and told him everything right from the moment he first bumped into Keya, to when he realized that what he felt for her was unlike anything before, right up to this moment.

“So, you’re going to marry her?” Rishi asked wide-eyed, more shocked than he had been earlier.

“Yes!”

“Why?” Shaking his head Rishi continued, “I don’t understand. You’ve never needed to marry any girl you have wanted before. Why is she different?”

“Because, she is very special. I know that she is the only woman for me and I don’t think I can bear a life without her in it.”

Rishi’s eyes widened. “Wow, this is big, much bigger than I imagined it would be.”

“You bet it is,” Sameer said. “Can you imagine that one of us is actually thinking of getting married?”

Rishi shook his head. “Unbelievable, but I seriously can’t imagine myself in your position, ready to give up all those lovely women out there for just one.”

“Me neither,” said Sameer.

“Come on you guys, I never expected it either. But when you two find the one, you’ll know and then you’ll eat your words.”

“Ah! We’ll have to see about that, but right now I am thrilled for you,” Rishi said and got up to hug his cousin.

Keya stepped out of the pool after swimming a few laps, unclasped her hair and squeezed the water off them as best as she could. Feeling satisfied she twisted them back into a knot, high on her head. She lowered herself into the Jacuzzi tub, immediately relaxing in its warm swirling waters, completely at ease.

She looked up into the starlit sky and thought how wonderful it was at this time of the night, just her and the silence. The yacht was docked in the waters of the Arabian Sea away from the city and the sky surrounded her was like a twinkling blanket. The only lights on were the low lights of the pool, the Jacuzzi and the stars. It was peaceful. She shut her eyes and enjoyed the cool night, thinking of Kabier, wondering if he was asleep or as wide awake as she was, wondering whether he had been as affected as she was.

Kabier stepped onto the pool deck expecting to be the only one to inhabit the pool at this hour of the night. But as he climbed on the deck, he was mesmerized by the sight of Keya in the Jacuzzi, her eyes shut, her head thrown back, evidently enjoying the peace all around. She smiled to herself and opened her eyes. Kabier saw her eyes widen first and then on recognizing him, he saw her give him a smile.

“Seems like I wasn’t the only one not getting any sleep,” Keya said, appraising him from top to toe.

He was dressed in a pair of swimming trunks. Her eyes roamed from his face down to his bare chest that narrowed down to washboard abs. And then further down over muscular thighs and very strong legs. She had always thought he would be powerfully built, but seeing him like this, made her head spin. She brought her eyes back to his face. He was smiling at her, having noticed her appraisal of him. Keya felt the color rise to her cheeks, but she did not look away from him.

“Yeah, and looks like you had the same idea of a late night swim like I did.”

Kabier entered the Jacuzzi and sat down next to her. Looking up into the night sky he told her, “It’s a lovely night! I have never seen so many stars in my entire life.”

“Me neither,” Keya replied, gazing into the sky herself.

“Sometimes I feel I am so busy, that I have no time to sit back and enjoy the wonders of nature or the other beautiful moments that life offers you, such as this,” Kabier said spreading his hand to the expanse of the sky surrounding them.

He looked into her face to see her silently observing the sky, totally relaxed, a small smile lighting her features. She looked like a siren amid the stars and the water. He lowered his eyes to scan the rest of her. She was wearing a modestly cut bikini that curved sensuously around her chest, displaying just enough cleavage. Her flat stomach and narrow waist could be seen just below the water surface. He could just about make out her bare long legs stretched besides his under the gushing water. She was temptation undefined.

Without thinking about what he was doing, he snaked his hand up her head and unclasped the clip that held her hair. Keya turned to face him, taken aback, her hair tumbling around her shoulders.

“I’ve wanted to do that since evening,” he said, lifting the heavy mass of her hair from her nape and testing its weight in his hands. He ran his fingers through her hair, before saying, “You have such gorgeous hair.”

Keya saw Kabier bend closer to her, angling his head and then he touched the side of her neck, just below her ear with his lips. She gasped aloud at the softness of the caress. Kabier moved his mouth from her neck to the side of her face, kissing her all the way down to her chin and then finally capturing her parted lips in a kiss. It was like coming home. She welcomed him into her mouth, opening her lips for him, giving him the entry he wanted, tangling her tongue with his.

And just like that, he was on fire now. He kissed her deeply and wildly.

Kabier put his hands on either side of her face and held her to the kiss; a kiss that was slowly spinning out of control.

Keya met his fire with her own, she put her arms around his neck, moving as close to him as she could, considering the position that they were currently in; sitting side by side.

Understanding her need to be close, still kissing her, he gripped her waist and settled her astride him in the water, pulling her closer into his arms.

Desire rose in her, searing every inch of her being. Her kiss grew hungrier; she started licking his lips and then as she kissed his jaw, she felt

the slight scratch of his stubble, which excited her even more. Soon she was tracing a path down his throat with her tongue, tasting him, all the way down to the base of his neck, where his pulse was beating wildly.

Kabier caught her nape and brought her lips back to his own. She boldly plunged her tongue into his mouth.

God! She was wild and unrestrained and she was driving him mad.

Her body was calling out to him like a song. He could feel the rising beat of it in his blood; she was slowly pushing him over the edge. He had wanted to go slow with her, to take it easy, to savor their time together. But Keya had a different agenda on her mind.

She clung to him, wreaking havoc on his senses. Her hands roamed, unrestrainedly, all over his chest and back again, caressing him softly. He was losing control and very fast.

Breaking away from the kiss, he took a deep breath to calm his dizzying senses, to reduce the pounding in his blood. Spearling her hands through his hair, she pulled his head towards her again and brought her mouth back on his, kissing him fiercely. Unable to deny her, he kissed her back.

Keya moved even closer to him, already straddling him, she shifted, rubbing herself against him; once and then again and again. He groaned. Pulled out of the kiss long enough to roar, "Keya, do you have any idea..." before she sealed her lips back with his.

She didn't have any idea, but she wanted to learn. Keya wanted to know more and experience all there was to experience with him. She had lost all semblance of control long back. Kabier shifted her slightly away from him and untied the straps of her bikini top, pushed it aside and covered her bared breasts with his hands. He held them firmly in each palm, squeezed and then kneaded.

Her nipples had already furled into tight buds and he stroked them with the pad of his thumb.

Delicious shards of sensation streaked through her. Keya gasped; a nameless yearning was rising deep inside her. Kabier gently bent her backwards, kissed the upper swells of her breasts and then closed his mouth over one rosy mound and settled to torture her senses.

He proceeded to ravage her body and her mind and Keya lost all touch with reality. The only reality was the sensations he was evoking. The yearning grew stronger as he repeated his ministrations on the other breast.



He paused and she felt his breath, ragged and shallow on her sensitized peaks, his hands cupping them, before he pulled her mouth into a searing kiss that flooded her mind with pleasure.

Slowly he moved his hands from her breasts down her bare stomach, curving her waist and then moved lower to caress her inner thighs under the water. He touched her core then, through the wet, clinging material of her bikini bottom. Keya shuddered and kissed him even more fiercely. He stroked her slowly and surely, expertly caressing her, until she felt dizzy, mindless, till she was a quivering mass in his arms.

Keya felt like her world was going to explode – and then it did.

Kabier knew the moment she climaxed. It was powerful and almost took him over the brink. He moved back from the kiss, to see the look of satiation set in. He saw the changing expressions of realization and contentment on her face. And then, her eyes opened and she looked at him in wide-eyed amazement.

For a long moment Keya simply stared at him, dazed. He had taken her to heaven and back. She saw him smile, saw his eyes roam over her body and then with a sigh, he tied back the bikini top into place and lifted her up out of the water. He held her close to him, while he took a towel from one of the loungers nearby and wrapped her in it. He picked up her shirt and proceeded to lead her back to her bedroom. Keya was silent, still suspended from reality, from what he had made her feel. On reaching her bedroom he kissed her lips one last time. “Sleep well. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He headed back to his own room. He had been so close to losing control tonight. Since when did he let desire overcome his senses? This was so not like him. In the past he always managed to maintain control in all his sexual encounters. But with Keya, it was different. He was a puppet in her hands; with her controlling the strings. For a moment tonight when she had rubbed herself against him, he had just wanted to plunge deep inside her and to hell with the consequences. But sanity had returned just in time. At the right time; fighting for control himself he had shown her a piece of heaven, a piece of the magic that only the two of them could create together. She had taken a bold step with him tonight. He knew that in time; he would make her accept that she belonged only with him. On that last thought he hit the bed.

# Chapter 19

Raashi had woken her up in the morning. Last night after Kabier had left her at the door to her cabin on the yacht, she had just barely managed to change her clothes before she lay on the bed exhausted and fell into blissful sleep. But it was time to get moving. They had just enough time for breakfast before the yacht headed back to the marina where it was normally docked.

All through breakfast she had been surrounded by people and so was Kabier. He had given her a secret knowing smile when she had entered and then casually resumed the conversation he was having with the people around him. Keya had felt the heat creep under her skin on seeing him. Seeing him brought back the reality of last night, vividly, to her mind.

Last night had been just simply wonderful. She had experienced the most mind-numbing sensations. She wasn't sure what she had wanted when he had taken her in his arms, just that the need to be as close as possible to him had overtaken all her thinking ability. She hadn't been in any position to stop him. This was crazy, she thought. It was like accepting that she was in love with him, even to herself, had opened the flood gates of emotions for her.

She had to learn to control herself, her mind and body around him or very soon he would realize the depth of what she felt for him. She had to hide her real feelings for him until she was sure that he wouldn't balk and run far away from her. Kabier Sehgal wasn't into serious long term relationships of any kind and he had told her so himself, in the not so distant past. So she better remember that before she did some serious damage to her heart.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Rithwik called out to her. Raashi and Aditya were settled in the car and they were waiting for her.

Just as she took a step forward towards the car, Kabier caught her by the elbow and whispered into her ear, "Meet me for dinner tonight."

Her eyes lit up, about to agree, when she lowered them again. "Raashi and I have promised Sheena that from now until the wedding, we will spend every evening with her, wherever she is."

"It's Sunday, Keya! Tell her you can't make it."

"I can't Kabier. The three of us have waited for one of us to get married for years. I have to be with her now. She needs me."

Kabier mumbled a four letter word under breath.

“So, I assume that you’ll be at my place tonight?”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“Then I’ll see you tonight, in any case,” Kabier turned around and walked up to his car, where Sameer and Rishi were waiting for him.

“Hey Kabier, I saw you whispering to Keya earlier. So, you got a date tonight or what?” Rishi asked Kabier from the back seat of the car. Sameer was driving them home from the yacht and they had just stopped outside Kabier’s home.

Kabier turned behind to look at him, “No, not tonight.”

“So, tomorrow then?”

“No, I doubt it’ll be till after Sheena’s wedding. She’s promised to spend as much time as possible with Sheena till the wedding.”

“And that’s okay by you?” Rishi asked amazed. He had never seen Kabier bow to the wishes of a woman before, especially one he was pursuing.

“Well, I don’t have much of a choice do I? They’re extremely close and apparently they’ve been waiting for one of them to get married since forever maybe, so it’s like next to impossible to get her out of my sister’s hands for the next two weeks,” Kabier said with a grimace.

“Oh! So someone is going to be extremely frustrated these next few days, huh?” Rishi said pulling Kabier’s leg. He rarely had a chance to get the better of his older cousin and he was enjoying every minute of this.

“Stop it, Rishi.” Sameer scolded his brother jovially. To Kabier he said, “What’s with these girls? Why do all their girlie fantasies involve a wedding? It’s beyond me.”

Kabier shrugged his shoulders. “Me too! Any case, I’m assuming that my mom’s not going to let Sheena out of her sight for the next two weeks, so I suppose Keya and Raashi will be at my place all those evenings before the wedding. So, at least I’ll get to spend time with her. You guys want to drop in for a while later?”

“I’ll come,” said Sameer.

“What about you?” Kabier asked Rishi.

“I won’t miss it for anything in the world! How often do I get to see my big brother make a fool of himself over a woman?” Kabier laughed, shook his head, got out of the car and waved them off.

In reality the next few days were the most frustrating days of his life. A whole week had passed and he had hardly exchanged a few words with

Keya. They were both very busy at work during the days and in the evenings Keya was busy with Sheena, doing last minute things with her like packing or going out with her to distribute wedding invites to some of their friends. Sameer and Rishi gave him company on most nights and whenever they couldn't he would lock himself in his study and work on his laptop. It was highly annoying that Keya was around him and yet not with him.

And then before he knew it, the chaos increased tenfold as the twins descended from London with their entourage of friends.

The twins had planned a dance performance for Sheena's sangeet. Since the trend was that the close family and friends of the bride and groom performed choreographed dances on some of the latest hits, the twins, Shauna and Rhea had started practicing daily with their friends. They didn't need a lot to convince Rishi, Raashi and Keya. And just yesterday he had heard that Sameer had also agreed to dance with the lot. They had tried to convince him too, but he just wasn't interested.

Keya was also having an extremely hectic week. She had things to complete at work before she took off for the wedding. She was about to leave for yet another meeting when Kabier knocked on her door and entered, shutting the door behind him. Without a word, he walked towards her and before she could say as much as a hello, he had her in his arms and was kissing her senseless. It took her a moment and then she was kissing him back, putting all the pent up emotion she felt for him in the kiss. She had missed him.

Kabier kissed her ravenously; devouring her. He had been deprived of touching her for so long that he felt that if he had to spend any more apart from her, he would die. He wished he could just whiz her off somewhere for a day or so, rather make that a week and to hell with everything else.

"Hey," he told her, finally breaking from the kiss, still holding her.

"That was amazing."

"I know. I've missed you," he told her honestly.

"Me too!"

"Where are you off to?" he asked noticing the papers in her hand.

"Meeting."

"Can you cancel?"

She smiled. "What do you have in mind?"

"I was thinking of taking you out for lunch. Can you manage to make time for me?" he asked her.

Keya turned to look back at the calendar of her laptop and then made a phone call rescheduling her meeting.

“Alright then, we are good to go.”

“Come on, I’ll drive you.”

As they exited the elevator on the ground floor lobby, they walked towards a group of Keya’s colleagues who were on their way to lunch, someone called out to Keya and she went across to meet them. While he was waiting for her to finish her conversation, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Trisha smiling at him.

“Hello stranger!” she said.

“Hey Trisha, how are you doing? The foot better now?”

“Perfect. Thanks. How are the preparations going for Sheena’s wedding?”

“Good. We’re almost set for the big day. By the way, your invite has been lying on my desk since ages. I’ll send it over today. You will come, won’t you?” Kabier asked.

Just as Trisha was about to reply, Keya interrupted them. She linked her hand in his and leaned into him and said, “Hey sweetheart! Where’s that lunch you promised me?”

Kabier stared at Keya, very surprised. She never made a public display of their relationship. So her behaving like this was so not her. Before he could reply to her question, she turned to look at Trisha and said sweetly, “Oh Trisha, hi! Sorry, I didn’t see you earlier.”

Kabier shook his head finally getting what Keya was playing at.

“Actually, I was just asking Trisha if she would be attending Sheena’s wedding.”

Kabier said smiling at Keya now. He drew her closer to him and put his arm around her waist.

“Well, I am hungry. So if you’re done here, let’s go,” Keya said looking warmly into his eyes.

“Yeah, okay. Trisha I’ll catch you later.” Kabier steered Keya out of the lobby and towards his parked car.

“I hope you’re not inviting her for the wedding?” Keya asked him, the minute they sat inside the car.

“That was the plan, why?”

“I just can’t stand that woman. I’ve just about been tolerating her the last few years and now she’s getting on my nerves even more.”

“What is the problem with you two? Why don’t you like each other?”

“She’s succeeded in making my life hell on more than one occasion and frankly now I have had enough of her. What I dislike even more, especially now, is that every time she is around you, she tries to cling on to you like a sticky vine.” Keya made a face.

“I suppose the obvious display back there was meant for her benefit. And here I was thinking that you wanted to make our relationship public! Our lobby is very busy and a lot of people would have seen you draped around me,” Kabier told her mischievously.

“I don’t care about anyone else; as long as that woman gets the message that you are off limits to her. You are mine.”

Her words made his heart swell with pleasure.

“Is that so?” Kabier came forward to lean into her.

In reply to his question she came closer to him and kissed his smiling mouth.

“Yes you are mine, Kabier, as I am yours. And I mean it. I don’t want her at the wedding. So I’d rather you not invite her at all.”

Starting the car, Kabier said, “I can’t do that. And she’s really not that bad a person. You two just haven’t gotten along, that’s all.”

“Trust me Kabier, she’s dangerous. There is something about her that always makes me wary of her. I am just not comfortable of her being around you.”

“Well, I think she must have definitely got the message about the two of us, from the way you behaved today. So I am pretty sure she knows that I am not interested in her at all.”

“That may be the case, but please, for my sake, just don’t send her the wedding invite at all.”

“You’re crazy,” Kabier smiled.

Trisha was shocked beyond words. What had she been missing? The last time she had seen the two of them, was on the yacht and they hadn’t even been talking to one another. Trisha had enjoyed spending time with Kabier that afternoon. And he had seemed so concerned about her when she had fallen. But then her attempt to be alone with him had failed when Rithwik had escorted her to her room instead of Kabier. All her attempts to snag Kabier’s attention were failing. And somehow Keya had worked her way into his life. Something had happened between Keya and Kabier that had

definitely changed the equation between them. She had to do something soon, but what and how? She was at a loss for the first time in her life.

## Chapter 20

On Sunday, Keya had spent the entire morning and afternoon with the twins and their gang, practicing the different dances for Sheena's sangeet. She so wanted Kabier to participate but he just wouldn't agree. Sometimes, she wondered why he had to be so staid about every damn thing. Couldn't he just let loose and enjoy himself for a bit? Come to think of it, she had never seen him dance ever.

She ought to ask Sheena if he actually did know how to shake a leg. Even Sameer and Rishi were participating in the show they were putting up and they were dancing rather well, so it was quite surprising that Kabier wasn't interested.

Since they had practiced most of the day, the entire lot of people had gathered at Kabier's place at night. It was the night before Kabier, Sameer and Rishi left for Goa. They were leaving early to do a last minute check on everything before the rest of the family and the guests descended.

The house was lit up, beautifully. Every corner of the exterior was done up in lights, to celebrate the joyous occasion. Keya entered to even more noise and crowd than was usual since the last few days. She entered the main hall and noticed that it was already filled with Kabier's mom's friends and they were singing wedding songs and playing the dholak. She then went to the lawns where everyone else had congregated. A bar was setup in one corner and many people were standing around it.

She saw Janak sitting in one corner and went up to him. He had, definitely, recovered from his illness very well and looked as fit as he had in the past. He hugged her warmly and kissed both of her cheeks and they chatted for a while. All the time her eyes were searching the crowd looking for Kabier.

"He's not yet here," Janak told her knowingly.

"Who?" Keya pretended.

"Kabier, of course."

"I wasn't looking for him," Keya told him, not looking at him directly.

"Tch tch, you're not a good liar, so why even try."

"How did you know?"

"It's written all over your face; whenever he shows up, you light up



like a bulb. I've known you for a long time and I have never seen you this besotted, with anyone, like you are with him."

"Is it that obvious?" Keya asked him shyly.

"Not to everyone, but I know you very well Keya. At least I know for sure that he reciprocates the feeling."

"I doubt he feels the same way about me as I feel for him," Keya told him honestly.

"I think you need to give him a chance Keya! Let him into your life, into your heart. Learn to have faith. Not every man is like your father."

Before Keya could think of an answer, she saw Kabier step out on the lawns. He looked around and then his eyes found hers. He came towards her.

"Here he comes, but remember what I told you."

"Hey, you two! What are you talking about?" Kabier asked jovially.

"We were wondering where you were. Why don't you take Keya to the bar for a drink?" Janak advised.

"Can I get you something?"

"No, you guys have fun." Janak turned and walked towards another group of people.

"You look tired," Kabier told Keya the moment they were alone.

"I am; the twins are driving us mad, with all that dance practice. They've now decided to compere the whole performance themselves, so they're making us work double time to ensure that everything is perfect. But it's fun." She shook her head. "Tell me, why aren't you dancing with us?"

"It's just not like me to do something like that." Kabier shook his head.

"Either that or you simply have got two left feet."

"I do not have two left feet, in fact I can dance very well, thank you."

"Oh right!" Keya said rolling her eyes upwards.

"Seriously, I do know how to dance."

"Now, why do I find that hard to believe? Wait, maybe because I've not seen you dance ever, not when we met in that night club, some months ago, not on the yacht and now you refuse to participate in your own sister's sangeet."

"Oh come on! Don't tell me you are making a conclusion based on this alone."

Keya folded her arms and looked at him. "And why not? Anyone who

knows how to dance will simply move when music is played.”

“I am not just anyone.”

“So I rest my case. You do have two left feet.” Keya laughed aloud.

“What if I prove it to you that I don’t?”

“Yeah sure, whatever!”

“If I prove that I can dance and that too, to your satisfaction and expectation, you’ll give me what I ask for?” Kabier challenged her.

“Deal.” Keya was sure that he’d never be able to meet her level of expectation.

“You won’t back out of it.”

“I won’t. What are you going to do?” Keya asked.

“You’ll see.” He turned and headed towards the bar, leaving Keya standing alone staring after him, wondering if she was mistaken about him.

She followed him eventually and got caught up socializing with the people around. Kabier was always close by, near her and most of the times a part of the same circle in which she was standing. Keya was wearing a simple, full length, silk beige and gold anarkali. It had dark green and gold work on the neck and sleeves, with a beige churidar. She had a dark green and gold worked net dupatta, around her neck. She loved her outfit so she was extremely distressed when one of the twins’ friends accidentally bumped into her and she spilled her drink all over the front of her kurta. The liquid seeped through her outfit, leaving a big stain right through her front.

Sheena rushed to her and insisted that she go up to change into one of her outfits. The guy who had bumped into her, apologized profusely and Keya couldn’t help but laugh at his buoyant attempt to appease her.

Laughing she turned to go to Sheena’s room, to change.

Kabier watched her retreating into the house. He had witnessed the whole episode, standing on the side with his cousins. “Excuse me. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Kabier followed Keya into the house and upstairs to Sheena’s room. He had been delayed a bit because on his way in he had been stopped by his uncle and his friends. He looked around to check if Keya had already left when he saw her coming out of Sheena’s room.

Keya had taken the first thing she could find from Sheena’s wardrobe. She had changed into a long flowing yellow and gold anarkali. She exited the room and turned to shut the door when strong hands grabbed her waist and held her tight to an even stronger body. She turned into his arms and smiled

at him.

It was very quiet upstairs; down below the party was in full swing and no one had needed to venture up. Without a word he backed her against the wall and kissed her witless. His lips moved over her own sensuously, trapping her lips beneath his own. That was enough of an invitation for her; she wound her arms around his neck and opened her mouth to him, surrendering to him.

Keya had missed him so much in the last few days. She kissed him back, pouring all her love for him into the kiss. Kabier held her tight, pushing closer into her. He knew that he was playing with fire kissing her here in the corridor when anyone could walk in on them. He should have taken her into his room where they could have had some privacy. That had been his plan all along but the moment he saw her, he just had to have her in his arms.

He lifted his head as he heard a discreet cough in the background. He turned and saw Sameer and Rishi staring at him, arms folded. He growled in frustration. Keya turned at just that moment to see what the interruption was and seeing his cousins, she buried her face in his shoulder. He thought he heard her whisper Oh no!

“You guys sure have bad timing,” he said annoyed at his cousins.

“And you are taking one hell of a risk doing what you were doing just now,” said Sameer.

“Your mom was looking for you. You are lucky we saw you follow Keya and stopped your mom from coming here.” Rishi said.

“Damn!” Kabier whispered into Keya’s ear. “We have to go.”

She nodded and took a step away from him

He led her back from the house and walked her back to the lawns, with Sameer and Rishi following behind.

“Seriously, I mean, I didn’t think he had it this bad for her,” Rishi said as he saw Kabier and Keya mix with the crowd.

“Oh, he’s crazy about her, alright. I’ve guessed it since even before he accepted it to himself. She has him wrapped around her little finger and she doesn’t even know it. Heaven help him, when she realizes that,” Sameer said shuddering.

“I hope that never happens to us. I can’t imagine falling trap to a woman’s wiles and fancies,” Rishi said.

“Me neither. I just like them where I can do with them as I please, namely in my bed, to enjoy and then leave when the novelty ceases.” He then

turned to look at Raashi who has laughing at something one of his sisters had said. She, caught him staring at her but ignoring him, she continued to talk to his sisters.

Sameer smiled to himself.

# Chapter 21

It was Thursday morning and Keya was rushing to catch the flight that Raashi and she were taking to Goa. The flight took an hour to reach Goa and it took another hour before Raashi and she reached the Sehgal Hotel. Located on a popular beach in South Goa, it was one of the top five stars in the area. It was also the venue of the wedding.

Keya looked around; she knew that the entire hotel was booked for the family and friends of the bride and groom. Judging from the hustle and bustle, it seemed that quite a few of the guests were already in residence. Sheena and Rajiv's families were already here as they had arrived earlier in the morning. She had never been here before and was excited at the prospect of exploring the beautiful hotel and living in its luxurious rooms. From where she was standing in the lobby she could see the waters of the Arabian Sea; blue as the sky, stretching endlessly as far as the eyes could see.

She and Raashi waited at the reception to be given their room keys. On hearing their names the lady at the reception made a phone call and asked them to wait a few minutes. Within a minute she saw Kabier and Sameer walking towards them. On reaching them, Kabier came forward and hugged and kissed Keya on both her cheeks and then he did the same to Raashi. Sameer then came forward and greeted them the same way.

"Welcome, both of you," Sameer told them. This was his domain.

"I have your room cards with me here." He handed one each to Keya and Raashi.

"Separate rooms?" Keya asked taken aback. Raashi and she had both expected to be put up together.

Sameer smiled and said, "Well the hotel has been fully booked only for the wedding, so we could manage individual rooms for the two of you. Anyway, I am sure you two want to freshen up before lunch. So whenever you're ready come down to the pool. That's where we're having lunch. Just ask one of the staff and they'll guide you to it."

Looking at Keya, Kabier said, "I'll meet you in a bit." Sameer called for the concierge and gave him their room numbers, requesting him to deliver their luggage immediately. The girls, left them then, for their rooms.

As he saw Kabier watch Keya go Sameer asked him, "Kabier, I

haven't asked you if you like your room." Sameer was in charge and responsible for the hotel arrangements for the wedding. He had taken special care with regards to Keya's room.

"I'm surprised that you are asking me this question now. We have been here for three days already."

"Well, since the lady you've been waiting for has only just arrived, I thought I'd ask. Have you wondered whose room is accessible to yours through the connecting door?"

Kabier laughed getting the connection. Sameer continued, "If I assume correctly, you are not going to be sleeping alone for the next few days."

"Absolutely correct!" Kabier said, pleased that his cousin was so astute and had taken care of the very problem Kabier had been worrying about.

"To avoid the scandal that would have been caused by you walking in and out of her room, at all odd hours, this seemed to be the best arrangement. Don't you agree?" Sameer teased Kabier. "Besides I have informed the staff to leave Keya's connecting door unlocked."

"Perfect. Sameer, I owe you one, buddy."

Keya sought out Sheena and Rajiv as soon as she reached the pool side for lunch.

"You two excited?" Keya asked them warmly.

They looked into each other's eyes lovingly and then replied together, "Very!!" They laughed at their joint answer. The three of them chatted for a while. Keya smiled as they left her to greet their other guests.

Keya looked in the direction where they were going and spotted Kabier deep in conversation with his mother. Sameer was with them and then Kabier kissed the top of his mother's head warmly and gave her shoulders a squeeze. He was so good with his family, caring and protective, she observed.

Kabier was saying something, when mid-sentence, he caught Keya staring at him. He was lost for a moment and then he completely forgot what he was going to say. He just simply stared back at her. His mother turned around to see what had got him distracted and saw him staring at Keya. Surprised she looked from one to the other, the two of them lost in each other's eyes. Sameer, seeing the confusion in his aunt's eyes, nudged him slightly and Kabier resumed what he was saying. That was close, Kabier thought after his mom had left. If she found out he was interested in Keya,

she would hound him till he told her what was going on.

Besides he wasn't sure she would approve immediately. She had been subtly pointing out several of her friends daughters to him since a while now and he wasn't sure how she would react to Keya being the one he wanted to marry. He looked back at Keya and seeing her standing alone, went to talk to her.

Mina Sehgal was stunned. She had never seen Kabier blank out in the middle of a conversation before. But what she couldn't believe was the way he was staring, besotted, at Sheena's friend Keya. And the girl was staring back at him, like he was the only person on earth. What was going on here? She thought. In the past, she had met several of Kabier's girlfriends but he had never been smitten with them. She saw her son walk towards Keya, and tried to recall if there ever was a time when she had seen the two of them together, especially in the last few days when Keya had been home almost every night, but couldn't come up with anything.

She had to figure out if at all there was something going on between Kabier and Keya. Kabier had always been evasive about his private life, so asking him outright was totally out of the question. She could pester him only if she knew for sure that something was going on. So she went up to Sheena and subtly asked her, "Sheena, do you have any idea if Kabier is seeing someone lately."

Clearly taken aback by the question, Sheena replied, "Not that I know of. Why?"

"Just curious."

"Mom, what's on your mind?" Sheena asked, not convinced with her mother's reply.

"I kind of got the feeling that he has something going on with your friend, Keya."

"Why would you think that?" Sheena asked her mom, stunned by the question.

"Look at the two of them now."

Sheena turned to see Kabier and Keya talking quietly. Raashi joined them and soon Sameer and Rishi also joined their group. They were all in high spirits, joking and jesting with another.

"Oh Mom! They've just become good friends. Look at them, all of them. They've become pretty close since grandfather was taken ill. We weren't here and the rest of them, except Rishi, have met quite often the last

month. They were the ones who were around him and have taken care of him. It's obvious they have a great rapport," Sheena tried to convince her mother.

Mina was still skeptical, but she kept her thoughts to herself. "You're right, I suppose."

The afternoon passed by swiftly. Keya and Raashi returned to their rooms to rest for a while before they got ready for the welcome dinner function in the evening. Keya entered her room and examined it for the first time. She had stayed in several top end hotels of the world and she had to admit that this hotel was at par with most of them.

Her room was luxurious and was on the ground floor. She drew back the curtains and saw a glass door that opened onto a small terrace through which you could access the beach. Keya could see the water and for a second was tempted to take a dip, but she realized that she was just too tired for that. She closed the curtains and got into bed and within seconds was fast asleep. She slept for a whole two hours before Raashi called her to inform her that she would meet her outside her room in an hour.

Keya had a quick bath and got ready quickly. Her dress was a deep wine color. It was a short, sleeveless dress that hugged her chest and flowed over her hips and ended just above her knees. But she just couldn't get the zipper up. She pulled her hair to one side and twisted and turned in all angles but it just wouldn't budge. She was thinking that she would have to call Raashi to do this for her when she got the shock of her life.

Kabier entered Keya's room through the connecting door and quietly observed her futile attempts to pull up the zip of her dress.

"You need some help with that?" he asked her calmly.

Keya whirled around, her hand on her chest. "My God! Kabier, you scared the life out of me."

"Sorry, you want me to help you with that?" he asked her casually, totally unconcerned by her shocked expression.

Keya looked at him in confusion. She was sure she hadn't left the door to her room open, so how had he managed to get in here? Unable to come up with an answer she asked him, "How in the world did you come in here?"

Coming towards her he told her, "The connecting door between our rooms was deliberately left open."

"Oh!" she said, her mouth staying open in surprise.

She shook her head. "Kabier, I can't have any privacy with you walking into my room any time you feel like it."



Kabier put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. He tugged at the zipper of her dress and before pulling it up he bent down and placed a hot wet kiss on her waist, the part that was exposed by the zipper. He took the zipper up slowly, inch by inch, all the while pressing kisses up her back. Keya closed her eyes unable to do anything more. She could feel the heat of his mouth go right to her bones and as usual her body was betraying her, responding to his touch, lighting up like a flame. Finally he had her zipped up and then he kissed the exposed part of her back above the zipper, tracing a path from her upper back right up to the base of her neck, finding the wildly beating pulse, kissing it, before he turned her around to face him.

“You were saying something,” he asked her.

“Uh, yes,” Keya said trying to gather her thoughts. “Yes, you can’t just whiz in here any time you want.”

“I can and I will. From tonight onwards, you will be spending the nights with me. I am going to make love to you every moment I can get for the next few days we are here.”

Keya was speechless. She knew that they had been heading towards this for a while now. Being in his arms was her destiny, but knowing that it was going to happen tonight was making her nervous as hell.

Sensing her anxiety, Kabier gently touched her cheek and said, “It will be great between us. Trust me!” Not receiving an answer from her he continued, “Give yourself to me like you know you want to, like I want you to.”

He stepped back and held his hand out in front of her. She looked at him, his hand was held out to her and there was a silent plea in his eyes. Her decision had been made a long time back, she let go of the tension that had momentarily enveloped her and gently put her palm in his hand. Still looking at her, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

“Let’s go,” he said, holding on to her hand as he led her to the door. Keya picked up her room’s access card, a wrap and her purse from the table and let him lead her outside.

Kabier put her hand on his arm and opened the door of her room to see Raashi standing outside, apparently about to knock. Keya saw a flicker of worry cross her face as she saw Kabier, but she schooled her features and said, “Hi, you guys ready?”

“Yeah, we were just leaving,” Kabier replied and offered her his other

arm.

Raashi accepted his arm and put her hand on it.

“It sure is my lucky day! I am escorting the two most beautiful women to the party!” He grinned, and led them towards the venue.

## Chapter 22

The dinner was organized by the beach. The entire party area was enclosed by blazing fire torches on tall poles. These fire torches provided all the lighting needed for the event. Several people were already there. She saw Rithwik and Aditya walk towards them through the crowds. They had just arrived, late in the evening. They spent some time chatting. After a while Kabier left them, to play the good host.

Keya's eyes never strayed far from him. She saw him mingling with the crowd; meeting and greeting people. He looked as handsome as ever, in dark trousers, an informal dark jacket and a darker shirt inside.

As the evening wore on, Keya chatted with several people. She had heard that there were around three hundred guests expected. It was a small gathering compared to the several hundreds who would have been invited, had the wedding been in Mumbai. Keya was standing in a loud group consisting of the twins, Shauna and Rhea and their boisterous friends, who were extremely excited about the performance they would be putting up the next day. They fooled about endlessly discussing who would blunder and who would come through, Keya let her mind drift.

The setting was fantastic. She loved the fire torches, the crashing of the sea waves that could be seen and heard and the moon shining above them. It was surreal and she loved it. She turned around and saw that Kabier was standing with an uncle of Rajiv's who talked endlessly. Keya had been warned by Sheena about him and so far had escaped being introduced to him. She smiled at Kabier's obvious displeasure. He caught her smile and pulled out his cell phone from his jacket pocket and furiously typed something, all the while nodding his head to what the man was saying. The next instant her cell phone vibrated. She took it out and saw she had a message. It was Kabier.

"I'd rather be somewhere else right now."

"Where?" Keya texted back.

"On a bed, with you in it, preferably nude!!"

Reading the message Keya blushed red.

"You're blushing now!" was then promptly texted by Kabier.

She looked up at him and he looked away, pretending to be interested

in the conversation he was having. She didn't miss the slight smile that tweaked the corner of his lips.

"Right, and you can see that, huh?" texted Keya.

"I can't, but I do know that the color must be spreading from the valley between your breasts, to your neck and up to your face."

Now she felt hot all over. Keya couldn't believe that she was having this scandalous conversation with Kabier, with so many people around her. Any minute now, Raashi or Sheena or someone would check to see who she was busily texting, at this time of the night, when almost all their friends were right here amongst them.

She quickly deleted the message. She wasn't going to continue this conversation. The cell vibrated again.

"You look hot tonight. Special effort, for me?" came the message.

"You wish!"

"Ouch! You hurt my feelings now! Wanna know how you can make it up to me?"

"Maybe."

"Meet me in an hour, by the pool. I'll tell you then ;)"

"I'll think about it," Keya messaged back, her heart racing.

"If you don't come, I'll die of a broken heart. I'll be waitin. C ya soon!!"

The next hour was the longest she had ever had to wait. The food was served, but she wasn't hungry. Most of the crowd had taken off their foot wear and were now sitting on the beach. She too kicked off her sandals and joined Raashi, who was sitting with a group of people. Keya sat down, put her purse next to her and proceeded to nibble on the few bites of food she had on her plate. When she next glanced at her watch, she realized that it was already five past the hour. She was sitting sandwiched between Rithwik and Raashi. As discreetly as she could, she got up on the pretext of dropping her plate back and slid into her sandals. She passed her plate to a passing waiter and without a backward glance at her friends, she headed towards the pool. When she got there, Kabier was already there, waiting for her.

Kabier turned when he heard a movement behind him. Keya walked towards him.

"Hey," she said shyly, coming to a stop in front of him.

"I have to show you something, come with me," Kabier said and drew her hand in his. He guided her to a small lit up fountain, at the entrance to a

huge lawn.

He led her towards it.

Keya was fascinated by the fountain. He knew she'd love it.

The fountain was different. It was set on the floor and anyone could walk right inside it.

It had water gushing out from small slots on the floor. The slots were arranged into concentric circular rings. The water gushed out like a perfect rope from one slot, only to empty fully into another slot in any of the rings. Several streams of water were let loose at a time, unsynchronized, giving it the effect of a dancing fountain. The water streams crisscrossed at a height of about five feet in the air, before falling into their waiting slots. The pattern continued randomly. The fountain was lit with hidden lights from the slots. It was simply incredible.

Without a second thought, Keya stepped out of her sandals and ran into the fountain. She stood in the innermost ring and let the crisscrossing water crash on her. In moments she was drenched. But she didn't have a care in the world. After all, how often could one fulfill a childhood fantasy; the fantasy of being able to dance in a fountain, she thought happily.

Kabier watched Keya laugh and run from one water slot to the other. She was playing like a child in the water. Her laughter was so infectious. She looked like a water nymph, with her hair wet and her clothes clinging to her body. He was so in love with her.

The thought jolted him. He knew he felt a lot of things for her, like intense attraction, deep possessiveness that only he could have her and none other, hunger, desire, passion. He also knew that somewhere between all these emotions, there was something that ran deeper, something that tugged at his heart strings when she was around and especially when she wasn't. But he hadn't given it a thought. He thought that the emotions he had listed out were enough for him to want to marry her and bind her to him for life. But now in blinding clarity, watching her dance in the water like she did, he understood that he was madly in love with her, absolutely smitten by her.

Love! He couldn't believe that he, Kabier Sehgal, had fallen in love with this crazy girl who did crazy things to his heart.

She called out to him then, to join her and not thinking twice he reached her in the center. She danced in front of him, circling him, making him laugh. Keya caught his hand and tugged him with her round and round the fountain, until he too was totally drenched.

He stopped in the center of the fountain, holding her to him and there in the middle, with the water splashing, all around them, on them; he kissed her wet lips. Delighted, she kissed him back and put her arms around him, moving close to him. He tasted her wet mouth and the blood rushed to his head. A sudden gush of water, hit them straight on the face, forcing them to break apart, Keya squealed in delight and looked into Kabier's honeyed eyes, specked with gold.

He was gazing at her intently and she read the message his eyes were sending her. She stood on tip toe and voiced her acceptance in the best way she could, by kissing him. He held her to him for a second, kissed her voraciously and then the next moment he was tugging her hand and pulling her out of the fountain.

They barely made it to his room, before Kabier pulled her back in his arms and kissed her with a hunger that she had never before felt from him. Keya barely registered that that they were standing in some sort of a living room before he captured her lips with his. He was ravishing her mouth. Kabier parted her lips with his tongue and entered her mouth, caressing her tongue with his. He sucked on her lips, drinking from them. But he was in a hurry. He was desperate. From the moment he had kissed her wet clinging lips in the fountain, he had known he was a goner. He turned her around, buried his head in her wet hair and inhaled. Her hair smelt of lavender and a scent that was very much her own. He lifted the heavy mass of her hair and pushed it to the front of one shoulder, revealing her back to him. His mouth delicately nibbled at her shoulder as he unzipped her quickly. He pulled the dress off her arms, easing it down her hips. He then hurriedly took off the remainder of her clothes as well.

She stood with her back to him, totally in the nude. He turned her around and stepped back to stare at her. His eyes took in her slender throat, moved down over her creamy breasts, the rosy nipples already peaked. He took in his fill and let his eyes wander further down to the slim waist, down her navel to the core of her femininity, over her long legs and back again to her face.

"You're beautiful, Keya," he told her.

"Your turn," Keya said, pointing a finger at him.

Quickly he undid the buttons of his shirt, pulled it out of his trousers and shrugged his arms out. He then unclasped his belt and took off his trousers and briefs in one go. Keya gasped, she had never seen a real live

male stark-naked ever; let alone one as fully aroused as him. She wanted to stand there and take in this sight for a long, long time, but he had a different plan, he hauled her to his chest and carried her inside to the bedroom and laid her gently on the bed.

He watched her, her delicious body stretched on the crisp white sheets, her black hair fanned out on his white pillow. Seeing his fantasy of her come alive, almost made him lose it there and then. He shut his eyes to gain some control and climbed onto the bed.

He lowered his body on hers and saw her visible intake of breath, as she for the first time felt their bare, wet, bodies brush against each other. He rubbed his chest against her breasts till she was writhing beneath him. Raising himself on an elbow, he captured her mouth in a shattering kiss. He caressed her face with his hand and then moved lower to caress her throat, the upper swells of her breasts, before he captured one rosy mound in his hand and squeezed.

Keya felt her head spin. The moment he had lowered his body on hers, waves of pleasure had pulsed through her body. Now as he lowered his mouth to her chest, she felt she would die of the exquisite torture that his wet mouth was wreaking on her. With the thumb of one hand he was circling one of her breasts while his mouth laid claim on her other breast, sucking, licking and blowing softly on her. He then treated her other breast, to the same seductive ministrations and she felt totally out of control. Still suckling her breast, he lowered his hand further down, past her navel, at the juncture of her thighs. He parted her womanly folds and put his finger on her. She squirmed under his expert hands. She was wet and ready for him; he put his finger inside her and caressed her core. He knew exactly what she ached for and he gave it to her. He caressed her, slowly at first and then faster, increasing the pressure of his finger in her. She was trembling now, making incoherent sounds.

Keya felt adrift in a whirling sea of passion. She searched for an anchor to steady her, to help her out of this madness engulfing her, but she found none. Her body was acting of its own accord, rising to meet his stroking finger, pushing her more to the brink of the madness.

He pushed a second finger in her and she instantly came apart in his arms.

That was the final straw for him, he felt the blood pound wildly in his body, in his head and he knew that it was time. He took some time to don the

protection necessary and reached out for her again. He promised himself that next time he would be slow with her; and the next instant, he nudged her thighs apart and positioned himself on her, touching his heavy arousal to her entrance and slowly entered her.

Feeling her all tight and velvety around him, made him lose the fine thread of control he was hanging on to. In one sure stroke he penetrated her further, breaking through her virginal wall, capturing the scream off her lips, and hit home.

He tensed for a moment, letting her adjust to the size of him within her and very soon she was wriggling beneath him, encouraging him to move. He yielded to her and steadily moved inside her, stretching her hither-to unstretched muscles, filling her completely.

Keya put her hands on his back and held him tight. She no longer had a handle on reality, the only thing real was what was happening between them, she could feel the heat build inside her core, extend out to the rest of the body and she shut her eyes as she tried to reach the peak that was slowly coming nearer.

Kabier had lost all contact with everything, except the woman in his arms, whose body he was filling in smooth strokes. He could feel the humming in his blood get stronger by the second. He kissed her parted mouth and pushed further inside her softness. The next moment Keya felt her world spin out of control, she was falling into an abyss of pleasure and she held on to Kabier tighter, scraping her nails against his back and broke from the kiss to let out a scream.

In the next second with one strong final stroke, Kabier let out a roar and joined her; together they reached the heights of passion that took them completely over the edge.

An eternity later, they floated back to earth. Keya opened her eyes and saw Kabier watching her. He was still on top of her, still inside her. He lifted himself off her and slumped on the side of her, face down into a pillow. He stayed liked that for a few seconds, before turning to her. He caressed her cheek softly before saying, "You okay?"

She came forward, closer to him and kissed him softly on the lips.

"Thank you, that was wonderful." Keya was so happy. She had experienced magic with him. That was the only way she could describe making love with him.

Grinning from ear to ear now he said, "My pleasure, completely."



Turning to the other side he flicked off the switch, putting off the bedroom lights. Another flick of a switch and he turned the night lamp on. He then turned and pulled her back into his arms, so that her head was resting on his chest.

Kabier was thrilled. He had been sure that it would be wonderful between them. It had not only been magical but so very much more than that! Never before had he ever felt a connection with a woman like he did with Keya. But what made him even happier was that he was the first man to give her a taste of this magic. He had suspected long back that she was a virgin, but knowing for sure now, made it even more special. He was still grinning to himself when he realized that Keya was looking up at him.

“What are you grinning about?” she asked him playfully.

His expression immediately changed to a serious one. “You’ll get mad, if I tell you.”

“As if I am going to let you get away by not telling me, now.”

“Okay, I am thrilled, delighted, ecstatic, over the moon to be your first lover,” he told her with glee.

She looked at him for a whole second, before she raised herself off him and exploded, “Kabier Sehgal that was one of the most narrow-minded, conceited, egocentric things that you have ever told me. Seriously sometimes you’re so ancient.”

Kabier laughed and tugged her arm, so that she fell on top of his chest, her hair everywhere. He lifted her face off his chest and looked into her eyes deeply.

“Well call it what you like, but that’s the way I feel.” He then pulled her face towards him, and gave her an open-mouthed kiss.

Before he knew it he was aroused again and so was she. He turned her, so that she was lying under him and asked her, “You’re sure you are not hurting?”

“I will definitely be hurting a lot more if you don’t do what you intend to do,” Keya told him honestly.

Again he took his time to protect them, before kissing her. He entered her slowly; worried that she might be a bit sore. But she was having none of it and the minute he was inside her she clamped her legs tight around his thighs and was moving with him. They came together instantly, acquiring the soul shattering release that their bodies sought.

Keya was asleep seconds later, curled up in his arms. Kabier tugged

the blankets around them and fell asleep immediately, holding her tight.

Keya woke up feeling strange. The sunlight was pouring in through the drapes. She looked around confused and then it dawned on her that she was in Kabier's room in his bed and had spent the whole night with him.

He had shown her heaven, twice, and she could feel her body complain now as she recognized the aches and pains that were coming alive with every move she made. Her waist felt heavy and she realized that she was sleeping with her back to Kabier's chest, his arm curved possessively around her. She tried to extract herself out of his hold, he resisted the first time, mumbling something insubstantial, and when she tugged again, he released her, turned on his stomach and buried his face into the pillow. She got out of the bed looking at him for a whole minute, watching him sleep, the blanket falling to his waist to expose his broad back. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw her nail marks on his back.

She went to the attached bathroom to freshen up and take a shower. She took a long robe from the cabinet in the bathroom, wrapped herself in it and dried her hair.

Kabier was still sleeping in the same position that she had left him. Looking around, she found Kabier's watch and saw the time. It was half past ten in the morning. Oh God! Sheena's mehendi function was to start in half an hour and she was nowhere close to ready. Sheena would never forgive her for being late, but Kabier would face hell from all of his family if he was late. She sat on the bed next to him and gently tried to wake him up. He was fast asleep, not moving at all. Finally she kissed the center of his bare back, unable to resist and in the next instant he had pulled her under him.

She caressed his cheek. He looked so sweet, hair tousled, with the shadow of an overnight beard on his face.

He looked down into her eyes. "Good morning sweetheart, why are you all dressed?" He nudged the folds of her robe apart and started kissing the valley between her breasts.

Keya reveled in how quickly her body was responding to his, but reality returned and she pulled his head and looking into his eyes said, "Kabier, it's ten thirty in the morning, Sheena's function will start in thirty minutes."

"I hardly take any time to get dressed and I'll be even faster in what I plan to do now."

They recovered a long time later. Keya was the first one to come to

her senses. Kabier lay sated on top of her. She pushed him aside to again reach for his watch and yelled. It was fifteen minutes past eleven. She pushed him off her, pulling her robe from under him and tied it securely. He continued to lay slumped on his stomach.

“Kabier, I am going back to my room, to get ready. I’ll meet you in ten minutes. Will you be ready by then?”

Eyes shut; face still buried in the pillow he said, “I am getting up in a minute.”

Keya laughed.

She walked out of the bedroom into the hall, found the connecting door to her room, open from when he had come in earlier yesterday. She turned, she could see a bit of the bedroom from here and smiling at Kabier’s inert form, she entered her room.

There was someone pounding loudly on her door. Curious, she opened it to see Raashi standing outside completely dressed and ready for the function. She was holding Keya’s purse and wrap from the previous night.

Raashi observed Keya’s disheveled state and entered the room, pausing by the open connecting door, to see a glimpse of the rumpled bed in the adjoining room, with Kabier lying under the sheets, still slumped on the bed.

Keya shut the connecting door quietly.

“Need I ask the obvious?” Raashi asked her.

Keya just smiled shyly.

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?” Raashi knew her friend extremely well and had figured out what had happened.

Without hesitation Keya said, “Yes, I am in love with Kabier. I love him so much.”

Raashi stared at her aghast.

“Keya, what a stupid, stupid thing to do. How could you fall in love with him?” Raashi started pacing the room, she turned pointed to the adjoining room “That’s Kabier Sehgal, he doesn’t do love. He’s run from the ‘L’ word for as long as we have known him.”

Keya sat down on the bed. She said softly, “I know Raashi. I can’t help it. I didn’t set out to fall in love with him. It just happened.”

“Why Keya? He has already hurt you once before. You know that he’ll hurt you again, once he’s done with you. Why then did you have to

sleep with him?”

“I knew I wanted him from the first time I ran into him. When he touches me, I am completely lost. I just can’t seem to control myself around him. I know he hurt me earlier, but he has made up for it, you know that. The last few weeks I’ve seen a different side of him. He’s smart, extremely astute, very caring and oh so much fun. Most of all, he makes me laugh.

I am not sure if sleeping with him was a good idea or not or even if falling in love with him is good or bad for me; but look at us Raashi, we’re twenty seven years old.

We’ve both had tough childhoods that ruined us, stopped us from looking for emotional support from any man. So we never had a serious boyfriend. I can’t remember last time either of us, even remotely, felt anything more than friendship for any guy. I was thinking that I’d probably die a virgin, when Kabier Sehgal walked into my orderly life and shook it to its very foundation. He attracted me like no man had earlier and now I know no man ever will. So even if this entire thing with him is not real, that it won’t last, at least I’ll have some good memories to last me a life time.”

On a lighter note Keya said, “And who knows he may just fall in love with me and marry me.”

“Oh Keya!” Raashi hugged her tight. “I agree with you honey. But you do know that its wishful thinking to even consider that he’ll marry you.”

“I know Raashi. Right now I am just so happy to be with him. Last night was the most soul-shattering experience in my entire life. And I am quite sure; in fact I’m certain that he cares for me. So I just want to enjoy this time I have with him. However long it lasts.”

“Does he know how you feel about him?”

“No way, I don’t want to tell him either.”

“What about Sheena or Janak? She doesn’t know your history with him and if she finds out that you’re sleeping with him, she’ll throw a fit. At least Janak knows some of the bits, doesn’t he?” Raashi asked her.

“I haven’t thought of them at all in this whole thing. I would prefer neither of them knows. I know they love me to death, but Kabier is Janak’s grandson, Sheena’s brother. I’d hate for either of them to judge me.”

“I’ll stand by you, no matter what.”

Keya turned to hug her friend, a lone tear escaping down her cheek. She patted it with her finger, still holding her friend.

“Keya, you ready? I am starving,” Kabier entered Keya’s room. He

was momentarily taken aback to see the two girls holding each other tight.

The broke apart when they saw him. “Hey, you two, is everything alright?”

“Just fine,” Keya replied. Kabier saw Raashi staring mutinously towards him.

“Uh well, I guess I’ll meet you for breakfast or whatever is left of it,” Kabier said and turned to leave.

“I’ll come with you,” Raashi said.

The two of them left the room for Keya to get dressed.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the room, Raashi turned to Kabier and said very calmly, her voice dripping with contempt, “If you hurt her Kabier, I swear I’ll kill you with my bare hands.”

“Hang on; what makes you think I’ll hurt her?”

“You slept with her last night. How long before you tire of her like you do of all your women?”

“Look Raashi, I am not in the mood for this. I don’t know what you think about this or what anyone else will make out of this, but frankly I couldn’t care less. I am happy and so is Keya. That’s what’s more important to me.”

He speared his hand through his hair before continuing, “I know the three of you are extremely close to each other and thereby very possessive of one another. All I can say is that my intentions towards Keya are very honorable. Whatever happens in our relationship from now on is my business and hers, no one else’s! Not yours and not Sheena’s. So do me a favor and stay out of it.”

He walked away, leaving her glowering at his back. He knew he had been tough on Raashi, but hell it was his life; he didn’t want anyone judging him. Besides if he even hinted at what he felt for Keya to her, then she would definitely tell Keya. That was a given. So, it was best that Raashi and Sheena, if she found out, didn’t know about his true feelings for Keya, until he told her himself. He wanted her to hear it from him first and no one else and definitely not until he was sure that she would accept him forever into her life.

# Chapter 23

He reached the breakfast room to find that it wasn't entirely empty as he had expected it. There were quite a few latecomers like him. He took some breakfast from the buffet laid out and sat at a corner table, waiting for Keya to make an appearance. He didn't remember being this happy in years. He smiled thinking about the previous night and how special it had been for the two of them.

"Earth to Kabier."

Kabier was startled out of his reverie. Rishi was waving his hands in front of his face and Sameer was simply looking at him as if he'd lost it or something.

"Hello cousin! What's the happy smile about?" Rishi asked sitting in front of him. Sameer came around to sit next to Rishi.

"Hey guys, want some breakfast?" Kabier asked ignoring Rishi's question.

The two brothers looked at each other and Sameer said, "Have you seen the time? We've been up since hours."

"Which brings me back to my first question, what were you smiling about?" Rishi pestered.

Keya walked in looking chic in a red and gold churidar kurta, looking very much a part of the on-going wedding celebration. She smiled at the three men looking at her and went to the buffet where she piled up her plate with food.

Rishi turned back to him and said, "Don't answer. I got it. And you don't need to answer my next question as well, which was regarding where you disappeared last night, without even a word, to the two of us. Cause I figured the answer to that one too."

Keya put her plate down and sat in the vacant space next to Kabier and ate her food with gusto.

Finally she asked "So, the two of you ready for the performance tonight?"

"I am more than ready," Rishi answered.

"As ready as I can ever possibly be," Sameer replied with a huff. He rolled his eyes and said, "Kabier, you lucky guy! I don't know how I got

convinced into this dancing business. What the hell was I thinking when I let the twins convince me to participate?”

Kabier laughed. “Too late to back out now?”

“Absolutely, the twins would throw the loudest and scariest of their fits ever. No way can I back out now. I am so royally done for,” Sameer said miserably.

“Come on Sameer, you’re a great dancer and so is Rishi. You guys will rock for sure. And everyone is participating, other than Mr. High n Mighty here, and I am sure he’s the one who has two left feet and not you. That’s why he’s not taking part.”

Sameer and Rishi stared at Keya for a few seconds and then Rishi said, “Kabier doesn’t...” before he got kicked in the shin by Kabier, after which he just shut up.

Not noticing that exchange, Keya simply continued eating. When she had finished they all stood when she got up to leave. Kabier walked her out.

“You remember our bet?” Kabier asked her.

“The one about your dancing skills? Of course I do.”

“Be prepared to give me my spoils, if I win.”

“That’s if you win.”

“We’ll see, won’t we?” so saying, he turned and went to join his cousins.

Keya reached the banquet hall where Sheena’s mehendi function was going on in full swing. Two ladies were working on applying intricate designs of mehendi on Sheena’s hands and feet. Sheena looked lovely in her wedding finery. She was wearing a pink lehnga, with gold embroidery, that was bunched up to her shins, to expose her painted feet. Her choli was in a darker shade of pink, a halter that ended at her waist. She was wearing diamonds on her throat and ears.

She looked up when Keya reached her and said, “Good morning stranger. Thank you for making it,” she said a bit sarcastic.

“Sorry,” Keya said as she bent down to kiss her cheek. This appeased Sheena a bit and she smiled at Keya.

Raashi came to stand next to Keya.

“Have any of you seen my big brother today? He seems to have forgotten that his sister is getting married. Both my cousins have already made an appearance and Kabier still has to come in,” Sheena said extremely irritated.

“Oh there he is now,” Sheena said. Keya turned to see Kabier walking towards them. He came up to Sheena and bent to kiss her on the cheek.

“Looking good, sis.”

“Kabier, where have you been since morning? Everyone is asking for you. Mom’s been really upset that you hadn’t yet showed up.”

“Ya ya, I know. I am sorry. I just overslept. That’s all.”

Sheena looked from Kabier to Keya thoughtfully, wondering...and then said to herself, “no way!” She shook her head and cleared her thoughts.

Kabier’s mom came forward looking very angry at Kabier. He gave her a big hug and kissed her cheek and before she could say anything he said, “I know. I know I am late. So before you go ballistic, I’ll just apologize sincerely and promise that I’ll be there early for all the remaining functions.”

“Well, you better keep that promise,” Kabier’s mom said and walked away.

Kabier nudged Keya and asked her, “So are you not going to apply any of this mehendi thing?”

“I will but a bit later, see there’s already a big queue,” Keya replied and pointed towards the ladies who were sitting eagerly around three women who were applying mehendi on the hands of all the female guests.

“OK, I’ll catch you later.”

So far the groom’s family and guests hadn’t yet arrived. As per the tradition, the groom could enter the room only when Sheena’s mehendi application was complete. And right on cue, just as the mehendi women got up to leave, Rajiv entered in typical Indian style with two dhol wallas on either side of him, the rest of his family and guests following behind him. As Rajiv came forward towards Sheena, the group of girls around her dispersed and left her sitting there waiting for him to come to her.

The crowd cheered in delight when he sat next to Sheena and kissed her smack on the lips. Sheena, coyly, put forth her hennaed hands and feet for him to see and approve, which he did with great enthusiasm.

The dholwallas started beating their drums again and moved to the center of the hall, where they started singing a typical wedding number which called each and every member of the bride and groom’s side turn by turn to dance on the music they played. They were singing for the brothers to come on and dance and Kabier, Sameer and Rishi came into the center and danced, moving to the music.



Keya observed Kabier moving and thought, not bad, though not very great either. Looks like he was going to lose tonight she thought. Finally, after all the family members had finished dancing, they asked for all the friends of the couple to come forth and dance.

Kabier watched Keya, Raashi, Rithwik, Aditya and several others, come to the center and dance in a big noisy group. She danced well, he observed, but he already knew that. Rithwik was dancing near her, moving in tune to her steps, laughing at something she said to him. Though he knew that they were just friends, he didn't like her dancing with him. It disturbed him. He felt like screaming, 'She's mine' loudly for everyone to hear. But the music ended and the entire group walked away to lots of cheers and clapping.

Keya saw the scowl on Kabier's face the moment she ended her short dance with Rithwik. She couldn't believe that he was still jealous, despite knowing that Rithwik was just a close friend. She waited till he was alone and went up to him.

"You didn't like me dancing with Rithwik?" she asked him bluntly.

"I didn't, I know it's crazy and I know you're just friends, but still. It's like you are mine and I can't bear the thought of you with anyone else, not even dancing with Rithwik."

Keya was delighted at his statement. He was behaving in a manner that was ever so possessive about her. That was a good sign, right, she thought.

She held his arm and said, "Hey, it's no big deal."

"I know." Kabier shrugged his shoulders.

He saw her hand on his arm and lifted it up to view the henna design painted on it. It looked good he thought with her traditional outfit. He lifted her other hand up and observed the patterns on both hands, turning them front and back.

"There is a saying that if the color turns real dark on a girl's hand then she is going to have an extremely passionate sex life," Kabier told her still holding on to her hands.

She laughed.

"That's utter nonsense," Keya said trying to remove her hands from his grip. But he held on tight.

"Wanna try that one out tonight?" Kabier asked her casually.

She smiled shyly back at him.

He raised one of her hands higher, bent his head and planted a

lingering kiss on her wrist, just where the Henna design ended. Keya blushed, feeling heady and looked around.

“Kabier, you better let go of me. People can see us.”

He loosened his grip and she released her hands and walked away. Kabier’s eyes followed her retreating back and as if on cue she turned around, gave him a broad smile and continued to walk ahead.

Mina Sehgal, stood at a distance, catching the entire exchange between her son and Keya, convinced that something was up between them. Kabier had entered pretty late today and that too a few minutes after Keya had come in. It was too much of a coincidence she thought.

Her sister-in-law Rita, Sameer’s mother, came to stand beside her and questioned her “Any idea what’s up between Kabier and Sheena’s friend, Keya?”

“You saw it too?”

“Of course, everyone who was looking their way probably did.”

“It’s so not like him to flaunt his relationship in public,” Mina said worried.

“That’s more my Rishi’s style,” Rita commented smiling.

“Kabier’s never shown interest in any of the girls I subtly tried to put his way, ever since he’s returned to India and now of all the people he’s interested in Keya. I can’t believe it.”

Rita nodded her agreement.

“I am not sure whether I like the situation or not. Keya is a nice girl for sure, but...”

“She doesn’t have any family, no background that you know of. Basically, not your idea of a daughter-in-law,” Rita finished for her.

“Yes, you are right. Anyway, I better keep a closer eye on the two of them from now on,” Mina ended.

# Chapter 24

“Good evening, friends and family,” said Shauna in her confident manner.

“We’d like to welcome all of you to the Sangeet function of Sheena and Rajiv,” continued Rhea.

There was a big round of applause after which the twins continued alternating each other’s sentences.

“No wedding is complete without a sangeet night and no sangeet without some dances.”

“So sit back and enjoy the best performances that you will see in a looong time.”

“Our first two performers need no introduction; they’re smart, lovely and Sheena’s two best friends, who say that this particular song is something that the three of them have danced on since years, in the hope that they could perform this dance on one of their weddings. Please welcome the very beautiful and charming duo of Keya and Raashi.”

Kabier and Sameer were standing on one side, observing the twins take pride in their presentation. The twins were standing on a small stage in front of which an area had been cleared out for the dances. The lights turned low and Keya and Raashi came to the center and took their positions. As soon as the music started playing they moved in absolute sync to a lovely song that spoke about the mehendi ceremony of a girl and her best friends dancing and laughing with her. It was not a hip-hop number, in fact it was quite slow and simple and the girls performed on it beautifully. Kabier was spell bound looking at Keya dance. He knew she was a lovely dancer but this performance was marvelous. It was like she flowed to the music.

Unable to control herself, Sheena got up from where she was seated beside Rajiv, ran to where her two friends were performing, and without a care, she stood between them and danced the remainder of the song with them. The three girls were completely in tune with one another and danced in complete harmony. It was obvious to everyone that this was a dance that they had practiced and perfected right from the time they were little girls.

The crowd roared with cheers and claps. It was a fantastic performance. Kabier looked at Sameer who was equally spellbound. Finally

Sameer turned to him and said, “Those girls are just so beautiful!”

Kabier just laughed, totally agreeing with his line of thought. He looked at Keya walking back to him, looking lovely in a soft pink lehnga.

The twins got back on stage and one of them said, “Wow! That was lovely!! A wonderful start to the Sangeet, don’t you think?”

“And now we introduce you to our next performer. He is a thorough charmer, a total heart breaker and our very own brother Rishiiii.”

Keya and Raashi came to stand beside Kabier and Sameer and watched Rishi wow the crowd with his spectacular performance. Kabier was proud of the twins. They had done a great job in organizing this event, that too in the short time they had.

The show continued with other performances. The twins also performed, dancing on a peppy number with two of their guy friends.

Rishi glowered at the twins. “And you guys think I am wild. Look at those two. They’re heating up the dance floor with those two guys. Wait till I get my hands on those two morons they are dancing with.”

“Me too,” said Kabier and Sameer together, thoroughly irritated.

“You guys are simply too much. No wonder they rebel every chance they get,” Keya said. “It’s just a dance and that too such a peppy number. I truly, can’t understand what you find so offensive about it.”

“Whatever,” Rishi said, irritated. Kabier and Sameer just kept quiet, obviously disagreeing with her.

Keya shook her head in disgust at their attitude. These guys were never going to change she thought. God help the guys the twins actually fell in love with.

The twins ended their dance and returned to call on the final act of the night which was to be performed by Rishi, Sameer and Keya.

Kabier watched Keya dance with his cousins to a latest hit song. The three of them performed the dance flawlessly. Sameer twirled Keya into his arms and then Rishi twirled her away from him into his own arms and bent her down, low on the ground and pulled her up again and then the three of them were standing with Keya in between, hands up in the air, moving their palms down, their hips moving in tune to the beat. It was fabulous.

Kabier couldn’t stop smiling at this last performance. Three of his favorite people in the world were dancing together, it was just superb.

Keya finished the sequence standing in between Sameer and Rishi, who were holding each of her outstretched hands, kneeling on one knee on

the ground. The crowd roared and clapped. Sameer and Rishi got up and together they kissed either of her cheeks and holding each of her hands, led her from the dance floor.

She was on a high and she couldn't wait to meet Kabier to ask him how he felt about this performance of hers. She knew it went off very well. But she couldn't find him anywhere. She searched the crowd, but he was nowhere to be seen. She turned to ask Sameer if he knew, but before she could, the twins came back on stage. The audience calmed down and listened to them.

"So Shauna, didn't we say that was the last performance for tonight?"

"We did too Rhea, so what are we doing here?"

"Because there is one last performance, a surprise one at that, for the night." Rhea spoke loudly in a very excited voice.

Keya wondered what they were talking about. She didn't know of anyone else performing. What were these two up to now?

She tuned back in to hear. "And bringing in front of all you beautiful people out here, is our finale, the surprise element for tonight. It's someone who is especially close to our heart, someone who until the last had refused to perform with us and without whose participation this presentation would have been totally incomplete. We give you our very own big brother, the gorgeous and dashing, Kabier Sehgal."

There were cheers and Keya could see Sheena cheering the loudest. Standing next to Keya, Sameer and Rishi were whistling loudly.

The lights dimmed and Kabier stood in the center of the dance floor, back turned. The music started, he turned, the music paused in tempo for a heartbeat and he too paused, looked at Keya and gave her a naughty wink. The music started; it was a loud and extremely peppy number and Kabier moved to it like a pro. His movements were fluid and light. In short he rocked on the dance floor.

She had been completely stunned, when she had heard the twins announce his name. Now as she watched him dance on the floor, especially for her, she felt her heart beat double.

Kabier danced alone for the first two minutes of the song, sizzling on the floor and then he raised one of his arms to his side and Shauna rolled into his outstretched arm. He raised his other arm the same way and Rhea did the same. Holding them in his arms, the three of them moved in unison, swaying their hips side by side. Then he rolled them both away from him and standing

in between the twins, he performed the remainder of the dance with them, moving his body gracefully in tune with the music and the two girls. The music finally ended with both the girls in his arms again. It was fantastic. The crowd erupted in a loud roar of applause and gave the three of them a standing ovation, which they accepted gracefully.

Sameer and Rishi who were standing on either side of her, turned to look at her. Smiling Rishi said, "I bet you don't think that he has two left feet now."

"Did you guys know that he was going to perform tonight?" Keya asked them.

"Not till after breakfast this morning. We cornered him after we saw him let you believe that he has two left feet."

"That was simply the best performance of the night." Keya was proud.

Sameer and Rishi both smiled in response.

Kabier had seen Keya's stunned expression the moment he had turned on the dance floor. He walked up to her and before he could say anything, she held his hand and dragged him out of the banquet hall, onto the open terrace that accompanied the hall, pushed him to the wall and before he could even blink, she was kissing him wildly, passionately. Momentarily surprised he caught her waist and kissed her back with equal force and passion. Her lips were melding with his and her tongue was all over his mouth and inside it. They remained like this for a while; locked in each other's arms, kissing hungrily, till Kabier realized that they were out in the open and that anyone could walk in on them. But more than that, if he let her continue like this then there was no way they would be going back to the party. Slowly he extracted his mouth from hers and reluctantly held her back from him, his arms still around her waist.

"If I knew that this was the reception my performance would get, I would have agreed to participate long back." Kabier was all smiles.

"You were fantastic out there Kabier. You just rocked. I am so happy," Keya said totally out of breath.

Kabier was thrilled to see her like this. It was totally worth the effort.

"You were great too. Both the times you danced was..."

"Thanks, but you were simply super!" she interrupted.

"Which means that you lost our bet, Keya."

She smiled at him. "So what do you want from me."

"Now is not the time for this, but I'll say it anyway. I want you to take

back your resignation from Sehgal Systems.”

“But Kabier...” Keya started to say.

“No Keya, you promised that you would give me what I want and this is it.”

Keya closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Kabier watched different expressions flit across her face. He kissed her lips once again. “Think about it. And right now, much as I want to keep kissing you, we have to go back inside.”

The dance floor was open and almost everyone was dancing to the music that was being played. Kabier pulled Keya to a corner where Sameer and Rishi were dancing with their sisters and started moving with her, thrilled that she was dancing with him, finally.

# Chapter 25

Kabier watched his sister walk down the red carpeted aisle on his grandfather's arm, looking resplendent as a bride. Sheena walked towards where Rajiv was waiting for her under the marquee, set up in the middle of the lawns. He watched his grandfather kiss Sheena's forehead and put her hand in Rajiv's outstretched one.

He looked around and appreciated the way the lawns were done up, with flowers overflowing from tall poles, round tables with their pristine white covers, where the friends and family sat, watching the wedding ceremony. The marquee under which the wedding ceremony was to be performed was done up with different types of colorful creepers. Sameer had done a fantastic job with the arrangements and he was so grateful to him and had told him so.

Being December, the weather was perfect; just enough sunlight and not too hot to sit outside. Kabier had been standing at one side of the marquees waiting for his cousins to join him. He looked around to see where Keya was. He found her entering the lawns with Raashi and the twins and together they came to stand next to him.

He observed her quietly. She seemed unusually quiet and Kabier wondered what was bothering her. She just kept listening to the twins going on about something.

"Hey, who is that gorgeous hunk who just came in?" Kabier heard Shauna say suddenly.

"He seems a bit lost, should I go and help him find his way?" Rhea said playfully.

"Keya, Raashi, you're not looking. Isn't he a hunk?" Kabier heard Shauna repeat.

Kabier watched Keya look up in the direction the twins were pointing at. He saw her squint her eyes for a second, before she gave a broad smile and without a word to anyone, walked towards the direction of the guy the twins were talking about.

The guy was tall, almost Kabier's own height, not too fair, but not too dark either. He walked with a smooth confidence and lithe grace. And he was definitely very good looking. However, he did seem vaguely familiar. Kabier



saw him pause, survey the crowd and when he spotted Keya, he walked faster towards her. Kabier saw Keya run the final few steps, straight into the open arms of this guy who picked her up, twirled her in the air and then put her down, before enveloping her into a huge bear hug.

Keya moved slightly away from him, caught the guys face in both her hands and kissed him on both cheeks before she hugged him happily again and held him in her arms for the longest time.

At that instant, Kabier saw red. It was like his mind was paralyzed with an emotion that he had never felt before. Now he knew what jealousy felt like. He started walking towards the still hugging couple when his grandfather caught his arm, “Akash Karia, Keya’s little brother, just returned from London and from the obvious display, has surprised the daylights out of her.”

Kabier was speechless. He shook his head, the red haze settling down. No wonder the guy looked familiar, he thought. He had seen his photograph on the wall in Keya’s house; finally he made the connection. He looked back to see that Keya was standing beside her brother while he greeted Raashi, the same way he had greeted his sister. He saw him pick up Raashi and hug her tight and kiss her lovingly on both her cheeks, holding her face in his hands.

“Who the hell is that guy?” Sameer asked, having witnessed the display himself.

Janak stared at his two grandsons, raised his eyebrows to Kabier and walked away.

“That’s Keya’s little brother, Akash,” Kabier said.

“Not too little anymore, from what I can see,” Sameer retorted.

Kabier saw the three of them, come closer, walk towards Sheena, who was absolutely thrilled at seeing Akash. He watched her introduce him to Rajiv and the two men shook hands. Keya took Akash over to where Janak was standing and Kabier saw Akash touch his grandfather’s feet as a sign of respect before hugging him.

Keya looked around for Kabier and pulled her brother’s hand to introduce him to Kabier. This wedding clearly had a lot of surprises in store for her and she was so happy that her brother had made it. He was her only family and she loved him dearly. She hadn’t met him for so long and it was so great that he was here now. She pulled him along to where Kabier was standing, sincerely hoping that the two men hit it off with one another.

“Kabier, meet my brother Akash. And Akash, this is Kabier.” Keya

looked at Kabier and smiled sweetly.

Akash looked at his sister in surprise. She obviously felt something for this guy. It was the way she stressed on his name when she introduced him and the way she was smiling at him now. Akash looked from her to Kabier and then put his hand in Kabier's outstretched one.

"Welcome to Goa and to Sheena's wedding." Kabier shook Keya's brother's hand firmly.

"Kabier is Sheena's elder brother."

"You look happy!" Kabier looked at Keya.

"Thrilled! I wasn't expecting him to come."

Raashi came from behind and held onto Akash's arm.

"So, big guy, you sure surprised us. I thought you said you couldn't make it?" Raashi asked him.

"Well, the shocked smile on both your faces and Sheena's was worth it, wasn't it? And hello, this is Sheena's wedding. You think I want to spend the rest of my life hearing that I was way too busy to attend her wedding?" Akash said laughing.

Sheena called out to Keya and Raashi at that moment and they went up to her.

"So, how is work getting along? Are you enjoying the media business?" Kabier turned to ask Akash subtly, knowing very well that Akash didn't yet know about his inheritance.

"It's great. I love it," Akash said. "Keya's been talking to you about me, I see."

"Yes she has. She's thrilled that you're here. I think you've made her day today." Kabier turned to look at Keya.

Akash looked at Kabier stare intently at his sister. He smiled. "You seem to be quite close to my sister."

Kabier turned to look at Akash. "I am." There was no beating around the bush with this guy, Kabier thought. He liked that.

"So I won't be wrong in assuming that there is much more going on between you two than just friendship?" Akash asked him point blank.

In fact he was beginning to like Keya's brother. He seemed to be pretty sharp.

"Much more," Kabier answered, looking Akash straight in the eye.

Keya returned at that instant and put her hand around her brother's

arm, preventing any further inquisition on his part. Akash stared at Kabier, his eyes clearly giving the message that there would be hell to pay if his sister was hurt.

“Hey Keya, aren’t you going to introduce us?” the twins came from behind.

Before Keya could get a word out, Akash introduced himself. “I’m Akash, Keya’s younger brother and you two lovely ladies are?” cocking an eyebrow towards them.

“I am Shauna and this is my twin Rhea, we’re Sheena’s cousins.”

“So the good looks run in the family.” Akash winked, openly flirting with them now.

They giggled at his statement.

“Hey, you’re in London right?” Shauna asked him. Soon the twins had him involved in a discussion regarding London and edged him away from Keya and the rest.

Keya laughed looking at the three of them.

“You better watch it Keya, or else your brother will fall for their charms,” Sameer commented from behind.

“Akash can take care of himself! We’ve taught him well, haven’t we Raashi?” Keya replied grinning broadly. Her brother was a heart breaker and he sure knew his effect on the opposite gender and how to handle them.

Raashi nodded looking at Sameer who stared at her for a full five seconds, before looking back at the ongoing ceremony.

Keya watched the wedding ceremony silently. Her eyes filled with tears. She was happy for Sheena, but at the same time sad that their long friendship would never be the same again. Sheena and Raashi had been her support system for so long and it was going to be difficult not having Sheena around. She would have her own life and it would never be the same as it had been between the three of them. Raashi put her arm around Keya, obviously feeling the same emotions, tears flowing down her cheeks too.

Kabier saw the silent tears in Keya’s eyes and felt helpless. He wanted to go and comfort her, hold her in his arms, to tell her that he was there for her. But doing so would create a huge furor and his mother would never leave him alone after that. So he stood there, extremely upset, watching her wipe the tears that fell on her cheeks. Akash came and put his arms around each of the girls, obviously understanding their emotion. Then he bent down to whisper something in their ears which got him a playful punch and a laugh

from the two of them. Kabier smiled. Not only was Keya's brother extremely perceptive, but he also had his heart in the right place.

"What is it with women and weddings? Why is it that they have to cry on such a happy occasion?" Sameer asked him.

"I guess, they are thinking that it will never be the same for them and their friendship. The three of them have been together for so long that it must be tough for them to let go of Sheena," Kabier replied guessing the situation correctly.

Sameer just shrugged his shoulders, baffled.

Finally, the wedding ceremony came to an end. Keya watched Sheena and Rajiv come forward and accept wishes from their family. Sheena went up to Kabier and hugged him tight, he held her close. Similarly she went and met each of her cousins. Finally she came forward to meet Keya and Raashi.

Kabier saw each of the girls shed a few tears and then they just laughed, holding each other in a tight ring. Janak walked towards the trio and they happily included him into their circle. Janak and his three angels! He smiled and went towards them.

# Chapter 26

Kabier stood up, a glass of champagne in his hand and a spoon tinkling against the glass, calling attention to himself. His grandfather, mother, Sheena, Rajiv and Rajiv's parents formed the rest of the people gracing the bridal table with him. The reception was on in full swing and everywhere he could see people sitting around pristine white tables with red roses adorning their center.

"Today is a very special day for me. My little sister got married earlier today to 'the guy of her dreams', as she puts it herself." He looked fondly at Sheena before continuing, "When Sheena told me that she was in love with Rajiv, I just looked at her blankly, wondering what she was talking about."

He paused for a moment. "LOVE. What is it? Can anyone explain it? I for one surely didn't understand what the fuss was about."

There was pin drop silence in the hall, all eyes looking at him. Kabier searched around the hall for Keya, found her sitting between her brother and Raashi, with Rithwik, Aditya and other friends around their table, looking intently at him. He looked into Keya's eyes and continued the rest of his speech, "Then I saw the two of them together and I believed that it exists. That there is a special someone out there, for each and every one of us. And when you meet that special someone, you make them a promise to choose them always, over and above, anyone or anything. You feel their happiness, you feel their pain and most importantly you are their reason to smile. Love is indeed, a powerful promise. This is what the two of them have taught me.

So I'd like to take this opportunity to raise a toast to Sheena and Rajiv. To the love they share; and to the beautiful life ahead of them. May all their years together be filled with love and joy. And finally, to love and that special someone who exists for all of us." Raising his glass high, he looked at Keya and said, "Cheers" and took a sip of his champagne.

"That was quite a speech, don't you think so?" Akash, who was sitting by Keya's side, asked her.

She replied with a nonchalant, "Yeah!" Keya was too confused to respond in a more sensible manner.

She wasn't sure what to make of Kabier's speech. He had looked into her eyes all along while accepting that he finally believed in love. Did that

mean that he was in...? No, he hadn't told her that yet. Her heart racing now, she looked back at where he was sitting, listening to something his mother was telling him and thought could it be true? But Kabier would have told her by now wouldn't he? They had spent the most amazing time together these last two days. She loved him so very much and if there was even the remotest of chance that he felt anything more than affection for her, she'd grab it with both hands.

The band was starting to play some soulful romantic numbers and Keya saw Rajiv lead Sheena out onto the floor to dance. In a few moments Kabier whisked his mom onto the dance floor, as well. More couples got up to dance. Akash looked at his sister, she still looked slightly lost after Kabier's speech and said, "Wanna dance?"

Coming back to the present she put her hand in his outstretched one and let him lead her to the dance floor.

"Keya, have I said that you look lovely tonight in this black sari. It's gorgeous," Akash told her with an appreciative look.

"Thank you."

"And by the way, I guess I am not the only one who thinks so."

"Meaning?" Keya asked him puzzled.

"Kabier's been unable to get his eyes off you, ever since we started dancing."

Keya turned to look at Kabier, who smiled at her from the top of his mother's head. He really did look smart in his all black formal evening attire, she thought. Unknown to the two of them Kabier's mom turned slightly to see what had caught her son's attention for so long and saw him smiling warmly at Keya.

She had never looked prettier, Kabier thought. The black sari looked fantastic on her. She clearly was the most beautiful woman here tonight. He turned to look at his mom who raised her eyebrows in question at him, "Not now mom, later." Kabier told her.

"But..." Mina Sehgal said trying to get a word through, but her son stopped her and said, "Please mom, this is Sheena's night. I'll talk to you once we're back home okay?"

Knowing that nothing more would be forthcoming from Kabier, she just kept quiet.

The evening wore on and he finally realized that he had finished his social obligations and danced with all the women from his family and several

other guests. He went up to Keya, who was dancing with Rishi and tapped him on the shoulder and said, "It's my turn I believe." Rishi gave him a wink and disappeared. Kabier took Keya in his arms and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Stay with me for a few more nights, here in Goa?" Kabier asked her.

"I'd love to but it's just not possible. Akash is here and I have to return with him. As it is I hardly get to meet him and he's going back at the end of the week. I am leaving with him sometime after lunch tomorrow."

"Then I guess I just have to make the most of tonight, and make it last, until you are free to be with me, next week." Kabier pulled her closer to him. She rested her head on his shoulder and let him move her slowly on the floor. When she looked up at him, she saw him stare at her intently. She felt the attraction between them flare to life.

"Let's go." Looking around the dance floor, she found her brother dancing with Raashi. She caught Raashi's eyes and with her own indicated that she was leaving with Kabier and to take care of Akash. Understanding, Raashi nodded back at her.

Kabier took her hand and led her out of the banquet hall into a small alcove on the side, surrounded by huge potted plants and kissed her, long and hard. Her hands on his chest, Keya kissed him back. Without warning his lips left hers and holding on to her hand, he rapidly led her down the corridor to their room.

Mina Sehgal was shocked beyond words. She had followed them when she had seen Kabier leading Keya out of the party, her hand tightly clasped in his. Now she could see them behind some potted plants, locked in each other's arms, wildly kissing. Suddenly Kabier let go of Keya only to pull her along with him down a corridor that obviously led to the rooms. She shook her head and went back to join the now thinning crowd of the party.

The next morning was another busy bustling day. Sheena and Rajiv were leaving for their honeymoon in the morning, directly after breakfast. Keya packed her bags and waited while Kabier finalized his own. She didn't know what the future held for them, but she would cherish the time she had spent here with him, forever. They hadn't discussed anything regarding how they'd continue their relationship once they got back to the nitty gritty of reality from this paradise. He came up to her and drew her in his arms echoing her thoughts.

"Keya, the last few days and nights, that we've been together, have

been incredible.”

“I know but, what do we do now? Where do we go from here?” Keya asked him without hesitation and waited anxiously for his reply.

He looked at her strangely for a moment, before his cell rang, interrupting what he was about to say.

She heard enough of his side of the conversation to know that there was trouble in one of his businesses. She watched him pacing the floor, trying to figure out exactly what was going on. He hung up a few moments later.

“I have to leave for New York tonight. Something urgent has come up that needs my presence. I’ll be gone for at least a week if not more.” Holding her hand, he said, “Come with me.”

“Oh Kabier, I can’t. You know that. Much as I want to, but it’s not possible. My brother...” Keya said spreading her hands in the air.

“I know, I know. But I had to try.”

Pulling her back into his arms he kissed her warmly before saying, “So in answer to your earlier question, I’ll ask one of my own. Will you wait for me to come back before you start worrying yourself about the fate of our relationship?”

“I’ll wait for you,” Keya said and added silently to herself ‘forever’.

The week flew by, Kabier called Keya up at every opportunity he got, but owing to the time difference, it was difficult.

Keya missed him so much; it was like a huge vacuum had been created in her life by his absence. Although she had spent most of the week with Akash, her mind had never been far from Kabier.

Keya stopped her car at the airport terminal, unhooked her seatbelt and she was about to get out of the car when Akash stopped her, holding her arm. She looked at him curiously.

“Keya, I have to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Is there something I should know about Kabier Sehgal and you?”

Keya put her hands on the steering wheel, looking straight ahead for a few seconds before she turned back to her brother.

Akash raised his hand when she was about to answer and said, “That night after Sheena’s reception, you went back with him right?”

Keya nodded, bewildered. She hadn’t expected her brother to put two and two together, but he was much smarter than she gave him credit for.



“Raashi tried to give me some silly story of you being tired and wanting to retire early, and then I couldn’t see Kabier anywhere either. I know you can tell me to mind my own business, but I am worried about you.”

“That’s so sweet. But I can look after myself.”

“All the same, I just want to know what’s going on.”

“Akash, to be honest, I am not yet sure where my relationship with Kabier Sehgal is going. All I know is that he makes me truly happy; happier than I have felt in years. As of now, that’s all I want.”

“Keya, I hope you know what you are getting into.”

“You’d better hurry or you’ll miss your flight,” Keya said, changing the subject, clearly hesitating to take this conversation any further with him. If he found out that she was in love with Kabier, then she was sure he wouldn’t leave. He’d wait to talk to Kabier and find out his intentions towards her. And that was something she didn’t want at any cost. Whatever went on between Kabier and her had to be between them. She didn’t want anyone else influencing their relationship in any way. Not even her overprotective little brother.

Akash looked at his sister for a few seconds, he understood the reason for the answer that she was unwilling to give and got out of the car. She met him outside the car and gave him a hug.

“You take care. Okay? And call me in case of anything.” Akash gave her a wave and disappeared into the gathering crowd at the entrance of the terminal.

It was almost the end of the next week and still Kabier showed no signs of returning. He spoke to her every morning and then again late at night whenever he could, but he was quite busy as was apparent. Keya often wondered if it would be the same for the two of them, like it had been in Goa. God, those days felt like ages ago.

Back at work, she had the same tasks to handle. She had not yet taken back her resignation and although she had promised him she’d rethink her decision, she was unsure about what to do. While she was still rethinking her decision, Kabier sent an email to her and to her boss Munir requesting her to continue for a month more. Since he wasn’t around she just accepted the situation. In any case, she still considered leaving the wisest option. She was involved with him and it would probably just make it awkward to work together.

And what if he ended up calling the whole thing off, then what would

she do? It would be worse then, working with him. Leaving was definitely the only option. She would give him the one month he needed and leave. It was in her own best interest that she did this.

## Chapter 27

Mina Sehgal was reading the newspaper one morning, when she heard a loud crash. She rushed to see what was going on and found Kabier's study door open and the servants making a lot of noise inside it. She stepped inside to utter chaos. The servants were standing in front of a cabinet whose glass door was totally shattered. There was glass everywhere inside the cabinet and on the floor. On questioning the servants, she was told that a maid had lost balance while trying to clean the tops of the cabinets lining the walls of the room and rammed a ladder into one of the glass doors of a cabinet. Luckily the girl hadn't hurt herself but the door was shattered. Instructing them to immediately clear the area of glass, she stood there while they picked up the shards of glass from the floor and watched as they removed each and every file and book from the cabinet to clear the glass from inside. One of the maids placed a bunch of files on the table and while doing so, a photograph fell on the floor. Mina picked it up and was surprised to see Keya in it. Curious now, she looked around the stack of files to see where the picture had come from when she noticed a manila envelope lying open under a file. She emptied its contents on the table and saw a couple of more pictures and a report from an investigative agency.

She read the report and was totally thunderstruck by the contents. So far she had been very skeptical about her son's relationship with Keya, not knowing what to do about it. But now after reading the report she knew with certainty that Keya was definitely not the girl for him. At ease now she put the report and pictures back where she found them and continued to oversee the work of clearing the mess.

Keya reached Kabier's house late the next evening. Kabier had called her in a hurry sometime back and asked her to go to his home, scan some papers that he needed and email them to him immediately. He told her that the papers were lying in his room and he had informed his housekeeper to hand them over to her. Keya could use the desktop and scanner in the study at his home and send them to him on his email. It was a small request and Keya didn't think twice before going to his house to do as he requested.

Parking her car in the driveway, she got out and rang the bell. The housekeeper ushered her in and handed the envelope to her and asked her if

she needed anything else. Having been here several times before, she knew her way around and told the housekeeper where she would be. Keya also enquired if Kabier's mom was in, to which she got a negative reply. She entered the study and promptly scanned and sent him the documents. Keya then sent him a message informing him of the same. To which she got a response back as, "Thanks a ton!! Miss ya...see ya soon, I hope!!"

Still smiling at the text on her cell, she looked up and was startled to see Kabier's mom standing quietly observing her.

"Oh! I am sorry. You startled me. I thought you were away."

"I just returned a moment back. What are you doing here?" Mina Sehgal asked Keya coldly.

Surprised at her tone Keya replied, "Kabier left some papers home which he wanted me to scan and send him. I have just finished doing that and was in fact leaving."

"Considering that you work for him, I am sure that it wasn't too much trouble for you, was it?"

Keya shook her head, clearly astounded by her high handed statement.

"Keya, there is something that I want to talk to you about. Please sit." She indicated the two leather couches. She sat on one herself and Keya lowered herself on the other wondering what was going on. Kabier's mom had always been polite in the past and suddenly she was behaving cold and weird.

She looked up at her expectantly.

"I want to know the depth of your relationship with Kabier," Mina asked her bluntly.

"I am not sure I understand what you mean." Had Kabier told his mom something about them?

"Don't act coy with me Keya. I know you are sleeping with him. I saw how you two behaved with each other during the wedding. In fact anyone who paid the slightest attention to the two of you could have figured out what the two of you were up to."

"Has Kabier spoken to you?"

"Kabier hasn't and knowing him, he won't."

"I think it's best you talk to him first." Keya got up to leave. But what Mina Sehgal said next stopped her in her tracks. Had she heard correctly? Had Mina Sehgal said, "Clearly you consider sleeping with him the fastest way to get rich in life?"

“Excuse me?” Keya was shocked.

“You heard what I said. In fact I am angry with myself for not seeing you for what you really are and letting you continue to be friends with Sheena.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“I am talking about what a gold digger you are. First you have an affair with Sheena’s grandfather to better your career and then you use him to sell company secrets. And then you move on to bigger things! You try to entrap my son! But, I guess that would be natural for someone like you to do, right? He is one of the most eligible bachelors in the country today, so obviously marrying him would be hugely beneficial to you. And being the typical male he is, he couldn’t resist a beautiful woman even though he knew the truth about you.”

“You can’t talk like that about me. How dare you?” Keya said very angry now.

“Oh I can. I don’t need to prove anything to you, but here you can see it for yourself.” Mina Sehgal tossed a few papers in front of her. Keya picked up the papers and started reading them. Her head started pounding when she understood the impact of what she was holding in her hands. Kabier had gotten her investigated. And did he really think she was selling company secrets? No, this just couldn’t be happening.

“This is so not true. I am not...”

But Mina didn’t give her the chance to complete her sentence.

“I don’t know what Kabier was thinking of when he decided to sleep with you. But looking at it from a practical point of view, he may have done so as he had his company and grandfather’s best interests at heart. So, let me tell you one thing very clearly. You’re nothing but a plaything to him and after seeing this you’d be deluding yourself to think otherwise. You’re just the current flavor of the month, that’s all. Don’t harbor any false hopes where he is concerned. He is a Sehgal after all and he will not do anything to jeopardize the family name by marrying someone like you, someone without any family background to speak of. It’s best if you leave him alone,” Mina stated with finality.

Keya shot up to her feet. Tears were stinging her eyes as the impact of Kabier’s mother’s words hit home, straight to her heart.

“Excuse me! You know nothing about me or of my family background. So you better check your facts before pointing a finger at me.

And I am definitely not answerable to you or anyone else for that matter. As far as my relationship with your son is concerned, it's none of your business." Keya added the last statement to rile the older woman who was behaving so rudely towards her. "I always thought that you were way beyond the rich women who only thought about people like themselves to be the better part of society, but I guess I was wrong."

"You dare talk to me like this, in my own home, where you've been welcomed all your life? And now even after seeing the proof of your own doing in your hands, you have the nerve to talk to me like that," Mina retorted.

"Since you have already made up your mind about me, I am not going to even begin defending myself. You won't believe it anyway. So before this gets uglier than it already has, I'll just leave." Keya started walking out.

"Not before you promise that you'll leave my son alone," Mina said from where she was standing, behind Keya.

Extremely hurt and agitated Keya said the first thing that came in her mind, "I never make promises that I cannot keep." And without looking back, her head held high, Keya walked out of Kabier's house.

Hell! It had been a long two weeks, Kabier thought. He reached home in Mumbai bone tired and exhausted. He had worked late through two consecutive nights and during the long flight back home, just so that he could spend the weekend with Keya. He had missed her so much. But for the last two days she hadn't been herself; he could sense that from all the times that he had called her. Something was bothering her. He was sure of it. He reached his home late in the evening and called her up.

Keya ran out of the shower. Her phone was ringing incessantly. She grabbed her ringing phone without checking who was calling.

"Hey sweetheart! I am back."

She hadn't expected Kabier to be back tonight. After her disastrous conversation with his mother, she just hadn't been herself. Although she had stood up for herself, the truth was that Kabier had betrayed her. He had had her investigated and the agency had come up with the most horrible untruths about her. She knew that he believed that she had never been involved with his grandfather but to think that he thought she was selling the companies quotations to their competitors! It was so horrible. How could he have been so gentle and passionate with her if he thought that way about her? It was too much. She didn't know what to think and believe anymore.

“Uh, hi Kabier,” she said breathlessly into the phone.

There was silence for a few seconds before Kabier asked softly, “What’s bothering you Keya?”

“Nothing.”

“Come on. You’ve not been yourself since the last two days and I expected a warmer and happier response from you when you heard that I was back after two whole weeks.”

“Why?” Keya asked him.

“Why what?”

“Why should I be excited that you are back? Or yeah, maybe I should be excited. I am your current flavor of the month, right now. So actually I should be waiting to welcome you into my arms and bed. That’s what you expect don’t you? That’s how men like you treat their playthings.” Keya couldn’t help it. Suddenly all the hurt and anger that was pent up inside came rising to the surface. She lashed out, she was mad at him, at his mother, at herself. She should never have gotten involved with him in the first place. This whole relationship of theirs was based on a lie. There was no truth to it. She felt tears spring to her eyes again. For the last two days she had been miserable and crying every time she thought of him, which was most of the time. She had finally come to the conclusion that the only reason he got involved with her was to find out if she was leaking any sensitive information. He had played her for a fool and she was sick of it.

“What did you just say?”

“Exactly what you heard, Mr. Sehgal?”

Kabier rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. His patience was at an all-time low as he was already so stressed out and Keya was making him madder than hell now.

“Keya, I have just had a long flight of more than twenty hours, I’ve worked non-stop for two nights consecutively, just so that I could be with you over the weekend. So I’m sure you understand that I am definitely not in the mood for playing games. Can you please cut the crap and tell me what you are going on about?”

“Alright, you and I are just so done. It’s over. There was nothing between the two of us, at least nothing that could even remotely matter to you ever. So stop pretending that I mean something to you and leave me alone.”

“The hell I will,” Kabier roared into the phone. “What in the world has come over you? I thought I was tired and not thinking straight, but you are

behaving positively childish.”

Hopping mad, Keya just yelled down the phone.

“Look, I’ve said all I wanted to and that’s it. You want to know more, then go talk to your mother. She’s the one who finally opened my eyes to what I really mean to you. So don’t call me and don’t meet me ever again. I have had it with all of you.” Keya immediately disconnected the line. She wasn’t going to cry, no she wasn’t. She had hoped that she would have a chance to let him learn to love her, but after listening to his mother’s accusations, she knew it would never be so. He had never felt anything for her ever. It was all just a game to him. She went back to the shower to finish her bath, unable to control the tears that were coursing down her cheeks.



## Chapter 28

**B**loody hell! What in heaven's name had got into Keya, thought Kabier. He grabbed his car keys and rushed down. Just as he was reversing the car, his mother entered the gate. He rolled down his window to hear what she was saying.

"Kabier wait," he heard her call out.

"Mom, you and I have to talk. But not now!" He reversed his car and with a huge screech of his wheels he took off, leaving a trail of smoke behind him. His mother stood there, shell shocked! She was surprised to see him back home and doubly surprised to watch him disappear at that speed and without a word of explanation to her.

The door-bell was ringing, non-stop. Grabbing a towel and wrapping herself in it, Keya ran to the door. She peered through the peep-hole and saw that it was Kabier at the door.

"Go away. I don't want to talk to you," Keya told him through the shut door.

"You open up this very second, or I swear I'll break this door down. Try me Keya!" Kabier bellowed.

Reluctantly Keya opened the door to see Kabier standing there, fuming. Before she could say anything, he had entered the house and was shutting the door behind him.

"Why are you here?" she asked him folding her hands on her chest.

"One guess," he retorted angrily.

"There is nothing more that I want to say to you, so you might as well leave now."

He looked exhausted, she thought. And she wanted to run to him, hold him in her arms. But she wasn't going to do any of that. She had to be strong and not let her love for him carry her away.

"What was all that nonsense that you went on at me about, when we were on the phone?" he asked.

"I saw the file Kabier."

Kabier couldn't comprehend what she was saying. What in the world had gotten into her and what file was she talking about.

Seeing him silent she continued, "The one that had the agency's report

about me. Your mother showed it to me. Now I know why you thought I was having an affair with Janak. But seriously it was way too low and disgusting for you to sleep with me just to figure out if I am the one selling your damned company's quotation rates to the competitors. How could you do that to me?"

Disturbed and very angry she said, "And I was so stupid to think that our being together meant something to you too. It didn't, right? It was all a lie!"

How the hell had his mother gotten hold of that file? And why show it to Keya? No wonder she was hurt, and she looked torn, her eyes red. "Sweetheart have you been crying?" he asked, as he took a step closer to her but she backed away from him silently.

Taking a deep breath he said, "I know you're not the one involved in the fraud cases."

"Kabier, don't play games with me anymore. I read the file myself. You had me investigated."

"I had the fraud cases investigated, not you. I didn't know you worked for the company till I saw you at that board meeting. The agency came up with your name as the obvious suspect as they had managed to establish that a woman was behind the fraud and you were the only woman who had access to that information."

He gave her time to digest that before he continued, "And I don't care what that file says. I know you and I know you didn't do it. I agree that the file report was one of the reasons that I believed you were involved with my grandfather. But I have also known that there is no truth in that, for a long time now and you know that."

"No, I don't know anything anymore. I don't believe you. You used me and I let you do it. I let myself fall in..." Keya stopped abruptly; she refused to complete the sentence. She wasn't going to admit to him that she was in love with him. Thankfully Kabier was too shocked by what she was saying to notice what she had almost given away.

"Keya, I don't understand what's gotten into you. Why can't you simply believe what I am saying? It's the truth. I didn't use you. I haven't felt like this about any woman ever," Kabier said wanting to shake some sense into her.

"You could have told me about the file then. If you cared even a bit for me, you would have told me," Keya said slowly.

"I just didn't think about it. It was so long ago and honestly I forgot

about it. And I never thought that you would ever get your hands on it,” he told her truthfully.

Keya didn't know what to make of his words. She was scared to trust him again and she was ever so upset. If she had been even remotely important to him then he would have told her about the file. His mother had been right. She was nothing but a toy to him. He had played on her feelings and no matter how much she wanted to be with him, there was no point in continuing this relationship. It had been doomed from the start. They were two totally different people from completely different worlds and there was no way they could make it ever work between them.

“Fine, even if for a moment I believe what you are saying, I still see no future for our relationship. You will tire of me eventually and I just want to end it right now. Just leave my house and leave me alone.”

“I. Am. Never. Going. To. Leave. You. Alone. Ever. You get that?” he told her very slowly, anger accentuating his words even more.

“No Kabier. I don't want this anymore. What we had was never true, so let's forget it and move on. It's finished. I want it to be finished,” she told him in a cold voice.

Kabier noted the defiant way in which her chin tilted. He was beginning to recognize that it turned that way, when she was really furious, as she was now. Okay, she had a right to be furious. But he just couldn't understand for the life of him, why she wouldn't believe him. After all the time they had spent together, how could she believe that she meant so little to him? It made him mad that she wouldn't trust him. He had to show her how much their relationship meant to him. That what they had together was rare and special. He shut his eyes briefly and opened them again and he noticed the rest of her for the first time then.

His anger just disappeared and something more powerful took its place. He saw her chest heaving angrily under the towel; saw that her hair was wet and curling on her bare shoulders; the water still trickling down her face. She seemed to have just stepped out of the shower. Without saying a word to her, he stepped towards her, unbuttoning his shirt at the same time.

Keya knew the exact moment when desire overtook his anger. The anger was still there but ebbing away, and she could see the flare of hunger taking its place, clouding his honey gold eyes. She panicked. She knew she was in trouble. If he touched her, she would dissolve into a puddle in his arms.

Appearing calmer than she felt, she took a step backwards as he moved towards her and said, "What are you doing?"

Silently, he continued unbuttoning his shirt, till it opened to reveal his gorgeous chest. He simply shrugged out of his shirt and tossed it, uncaring where it fell.

Now she was dead sure of his intentions. She turned to run into her room, but he caught her before she could take two steps and in the next instant he twirled her around and held her with her back against the wall.

He stared into her eyes for a few seconds before saying very slowly and intently, "It will never be finished between us."

In the next second he caught her lips with his own in a fierce kiss. She tried to resist, but her body betrayed her. She melted into him.

He flicked the towel covering her with one of his hands and it opened to reveal her state of undress and even before she knew it, the towel just dropped to the floor. He stepped closer to her, covering her exposed breasts with his chest and then proceeded to kiss her hungrily. He ravished her mouth thoroughly. Kissing her jaw, her chin, her throat and then returning back to her mouth, kissing her fiercely again and again, showing her the passion that flowed and grew between them. Her mind whirled uncontrollably and she started responding to him. She kissed him back with the same hunger that he felt.

Feeling triumphant, Kabier let his hands roam leisurely over her body. She shivered and wound her arms around his back, holding him; she was sure she wouldn't be able to remain upright. She let him caress her body; it was as though she was made especially for him to touch.

Her arms still around him, Keya felt herself being lifted off the ground slightly, higher up on the wall.

"Wrap your legs around me, please," he requested in a hoarse voice.

Keya, lost in the craziness of the moment, couldn't deny his plea and did as she was asked. In the next instant she felt him push inside her with such force that it took her breath away. Her body welcomed him and she lost all grip on reality.

He hadn't made love to her in two weeks and he was in no mood to be patient. He drove into her satiny body furiously and he felt her rise to meet his powerful thrusts and then she simply gave herself up to the building heat inside her and came apart in his arms at the same time he shattered completely in hers. He wanted her to know that despite the fact that she

wanted to end it with him, for God alone knew what reason, she couldn't deny this magic. It was alive and pulsating between them.

Carrying her in his arms, Kabier walked into her bedroom and laid her down on the bed. Then he fell on to his stomach by her side, burying his face into a pillow. He was so tired that he felt he could fall asleep in a minute. But the sound of silent crying made him turn his head to see Keya weeping by his side.

Getting up to cover them with a blanket on the bed, he turned her on to her side to face him and holding her face in his hands, he asked her gently, "What is it sweetheart? Did I hurt you?"

"No, right now was perfect, just perfect," she managed to reply through her sobs.

"Then what is it? I can't bear to see you crying. Tell me please."

"Oh Kabier! I really wanted to end it with you. I didn't want to make love again. But when you touch me, I can't seem to help myself."

"Keya, aren't you happy with me?" Kabier asked, very concerned.

Touched by the worry in his eyes, Keya caressed his cheek. "I don't remember ever being so happy in my life. At least I thought I was."

"Then what is it? Why don't you believe me? I didn't get you investigated and I trust you. Please believe me."

"I do," Keya said softly.

"Then why do you want to end it between us? And what does any of this have to do with my mother? Tell me exactly what she told you."

Still crying Keya told him all that his mother had said to her. Kabier listened to her quietly. He let her pour her heart out to him. At the end she said, "I am tired of people thinking I have loose morals, especially when it involves Janak and now you. It's not fair and I don't deserve it. And I don't deserve being treated like I am not fit to breathe the same air as you do."

"I know sweetheart. I am not sure what my mom is about. I will have to talk to her, about you and about us."

"But she is right, Kabier. You are never serious about your relationships and I am your current plaything or flavor or whatever she called it. In the end you will marry someone of your social standing. So it makes me wonder what you are doing with me."

"Keya, I am dead serious about you," Kabier told her, looking deep into her eyes.

"That's for now, when the chemistry between us is so great. But what

about later, when you get bored like you always do with your women?”

“If that’s what you think, why don’t you marry me and find out if it ever gets boring between us?”

Stunned by his question, Keya kept silent for several seconds, waiting for him to laugh at his own joke. But he didn’t do that. He just stared at her waiting to hear her response. This couldn’t be true. Kabier couldn’t be asking her to marry him.

“Kabier, you don’t mean that.”

“I hardly ever say things that I don’t mean. Marry me Keya.”

Keya turned away from him and lay on her back and stared at the ceiling, her hand on her head. Finally she turned back to face him.

“Why? Why me? When you know your mother will not approve. When you know that you can get anyone you want?”

“Because I want you and only you. Not anyone else. Just you.”

Shaking her head, Keya said, “I am not sure. I need time to think this through.”

Kabier felt relieved. He had finally asked her to marry him. He hoped that she would agree easily but if she didn’t then he’d make it his quest, for the rest of his life if necessary, to convince her. At least now she knew that he wasn’t toying with her, he was serious.

“Okay, you take all the time you need. In the meantime, I need to sleep.” He pulled her back into his arms. And with her in his arms, he was asleep in seconds.

Keya went through their conversation, her mind going over and over the part where he had asked her to marry him. Was he serious about it? He hadn’t mentioned love at all in the whole equation. He wanted her now, what about later? No it couldn’t be. He must feel something more for her. She knew she wanted to accept his proposal. But could she do that, knowing very well that they hadn’t discussed love even once. Her brain was all muddled up.

Kabier snuggled into her and sighing deeply she fell asleep.

She woke up to find her cell phone ringing. She switched on the lamp beside her bed and saw that it was eight in the morning. She bent forward to reach for the phone, which was further down the side table, when it stopped ringing. Ignoring it, she turned to look at Kabier, sleeping peacefully beside her. She let her eyes move over his face, over the features that she loved so much and reached forward and kissed his forehead. He woke up then and put his arms around her. Keya’s cell rang again. She lifted it and pressed the

button to answer.

“Keya, this is Sameer.”

“Hi!” Keya whispered to Kabier that it was Sameer on the line.

“Uh Keya, I am not sure how to ask you this, but is Kabier with you?”

Understanding his hesitation Keya passed the phone to Kabier.

“Hey Sameer! What’s up?” Kabier asked his cousin.

“Kabier, it’s your mom. She’s worried sick about you. She says that you left in a blaze yesterday and haven’t returned home since. She’s been trying to reach you all morning, ever since she realized that you’re not home. Call her.”

“I will. If she calls you again, just tell her that I will reach home in ten minutes and nothing else understand?”

“Alright.” Sameer hung up.

“What happened?” Keya asked as soon as Kabier switched off the cell.

“I have to go home. I drove off in a real fury last night and since I haven’t returned home, my mom’s worried. In any case I have to talk to her regarding the conversation she had with you.” He got up from the bed and started donning his clothes.

“Kabier I already dealt with it. Just let it be,” Keya said, rising up.

“No Keya. She has to know the whole truth about us and that I am going to marry you.”

“I haven’t yet agreed.” She looked away from him.

Kabier returned to sit by her side on the bed and lifted her chin up, to look into her eyes.

“I do know that you are sorely tempted to agree. So I will move heaven and earth and do whatever it takes to ensure that you do agree.”

Keya watched him get dressed and leave and felt even more confused.

Mina Sehgal was pacing her living room when she saw Kabier enter. “Kabier where have you been the whole night? I have been so worried about you.” He let her hug him and held her for a moment before setting her away.

She saw her son look into the distance, as if assimilating his thoughts and then he turned to look back at her.

“I spent last night with Keya and I have asked her to marry me.” Kabier stated calmly, but his eyes betrayed the fact that he was livid.

“Why? Why would you do that? That too, after knowing everything about her?” Mina was zapped at hearing that Kabier had not only considered

marrying Keya but had proposed to her as well.

“Keya is not having an affair with grandfather. She cares for him, that’s all and he reciprocates the same for her. She has been nothing more than a granddaughter to him.”

“But that file...”

“Mom, I don’t know how you got hold of that file. And seriously you had no right to go through my stuff, let alone show it to Keya, without checking with me first. The information in that file was, is, speculation and is not true,” Kabier said getting agitated.

“Even if that wasn’t true, what about the fact that she has no family background to speak of and no social standing whatsoever? Knowing all this you still want to marry her and bring her to this house?” Mina asked him incredulously.

“I love her mom. I don’t care that she has none of the family or social background that you always hoped for in my wife. But I want her. And I don’t believe that you of all people wouldn’t understand this. You’ve always liked her as Sheena’s friend. What’s changed now?”

“No, I don’t understand it. As Sheena’s friend it didn’t matter that she didn’t have the qualities that I wanted in my daughter in-law. Besides, she spoke to me really rudely the last time we had a conversation and I cannot tolerate that.”

“Mom, you told her lots of nasty things yourself. Why did you have to decide for me whether she is important or not in my life? I make those decisions in my life, not you. And you should have spoken to me first before talking to her.”

“Oh, so now you’re taking her side over me. Is that it?”

Kabier shut his eyes for a moment. Then he opened them. “Mom please! Why can’t you just understand that she makes me happy?” Kabier asked gently. But his mom was adamant. He wondered what had gotten into her.

“Kabier, I mean it. I can’t stop you from marrying her if that’s what you want, but I will not have her staying in the same house as me, ever.” Mina said knowing very well that this house was very important to Kabier. She knew that it was the only place he called home.

“In that case mom, I guess I’ll just move in with her immediately. Because I am going to marry her and if you don’t accept that she has to come and stay here then I am leaving right now,” Kabier said with certainty.



Worried now, Mina came forward and held her son's arm. "Kabier please, I need time to think about this. Please don't do anything rash till then."

"Alright mom, take your time and I do hope after thinking it through that you'll come around. Keya is a lovely person and I know you have always liked her. Don't be influenced by what you read in that file. Give her a chance mom. For my sake please."

Nodding her head, Mina Sehgal left the room extremely upset.

## Chapter 29

“Sheena! Hi!” Keya said in surprise when she found Sheena standing in front of her door a few days later. Keya checked her watch. Kabier would be here in less than an hour. She was in a fix. Sheena didn’t know anything about them yet. Deciding not to panic; she put a smile on her face and greeted her friend warmly.

“Hi Keya,” Sheena said and came forward to hug her.

“How was the honeymoon?” Keya asked her.

“Superb. It was all I ever dreamt of.”

The two of them moved towards the sofas and sat down. They chatted comfortably for a while, all the time Keya kept checking her watch.

Sheena stopped talking. “What is it Keya? Are you expecting someone?”

“Uh...”

“I know Keya!” Sheena said gently. “About Kabier and you. You are waiting for him to come here, right?”

There was a terse silence.

“Actually Keya, I am quite upset that you didn’t tell me yourself.”

“Sheena, I don’t know what to say.” Keya shook her head, worried by the look on her friend’s face.

“My mom called me as soon as I returned. Though I don’t agree with all that she’s accusing you of and I told her that, I am completely taken aback that you are involved with my brother. I mean when? How? It is just unbelievable!”

“Sheena, things just happened between us, I didn’t plan on it. I should have told you earlier, but I wasn’t sure of your reaction, wasn’t sure if you would understand.”

“Why? Why wouldn’t I understand? We have been best friends since years. Just because he’s my brother, you kept me out of this important phase of your life, didn’t you?”

Keya nodded looking down, unable to face Sheena.

“And I am sure Raashi knows about this. How could you not tell me?” Sheena asked her, sounding very upset and hurt.

“I am so sorry, sweetie.”

“Keya, you’re my best friend and I have figured out that if you are sleeping with him, you must be in love with him. Isn’t it?”

Keya just nodded her acknowledgement.

“And now he’s been spending the last couple of nights here at your place right?”

Keya thought back over the last few days. Ever since the night Kabier had proposed to her, he had ensured that they spent maximum time with each other, whether at work or here at her place. And she was enjoying being with him; enjoying doing mundane things like cooking meals for him, watching TV or just simply talking to him.

It was as if he was trying to show her a bit of how life would be for them, if she agreed to marry him. He hadn’t brought it up again, but the question was hovering between them all the time. She knew she would have to answer him soon. But she still hadn’t made up her mind. A big part of her just wanted to agree. But she still had to convince her inner voice that asked, if he didn’t love her then where would this marriage lead them? Her mother had thought she married for love and it got her nowhere. Though Kabier was not like her father, entering a marriage with one-sided love was not what she wanted. That much, at least, she had learnt from her mother’s example.

Sheena reached forward and shook her out of her reverie.

“Hey, you haven’t answered my question.”

“Yes, he has been spending all his nights with me.”

“Keya, have you agreed to marry him?” Sheena’s question took her by surprise. She didn’t know that Kabier had discussed this with her.

Seeing the shock on her friend’s face Sheena said, “Kabier hasn’t spoken to me. But he’s told my mom in no uncertain terms that he is going to marry you. In fact, she knows he’s been here with you all these past nights and she has kind of accepted that she has no choice in the matter.”

“I haven’t yet agreed to marry him Sheena.”

“Why? You have already accepted that you are in love with him. Or was I mistaken about that?”

“I love him very much. More than I ever thought it possible for me to love.” Keya stared into the distance. “The question is whether he is in love with me,” she finally said softly.

Sheena looked at the turmoil on her friend’s face and reached out to hold her hand.

“I can’t answer that, since he hasn’t spoken to me. But I do know that Kabier must feel strongly about you to consider marrying and settling down. I’ve told you about him over the years. He has never shown any signs of even remotely considering marriage, until you. Seriously, I think you should take the risk and marry him.”

“I want to Sheena. But you know my history, my parent’s life. I find it difficult to accept him and marry without love. And even if I do, your mom will never...”

“Keya, my mom’s not a bad person. You’ve known her for years now. It’s just that like all typical mothers of sons she wanted someone from her own social background for Kabier as does Sameer’s mom for him and Rishi. They’re made like that. It doesn’t make them bad humans. Once she accepts you, she’ll never look back and will always treat you like one of her own.”

“If only it were that simple.”

Sheena smiled reassuringly. “I am happy for you Keya, happy that you and Kabier found each other. He is a great guy. Though, he is a bit overbearing at times,” Sheena said, making a face.

Keya laughed at that. She knew exactly how difficult Kabier could be!

“But he’ll take care of you. Just say yes. Let him give you the life that you’ve always wanted, always dreamt of.”

“I’ll think about what you said Sheena. I really will.”

“Just imagine we’ll be related then. You’ll be like a sister to me forever. Isn’t that cool?” Sheena said in her usual dreamy way.

Keya just smiled back in return.

“Sehgal Systems is one of the contenders for this deal,” a voice at the other end of the line told the woman. “It is a multi-million dollar transaction and any company that wins this deal will not only make a lot of money but will gain a sure shot entry to all the other software deals of this huge oil company. My company will pay you extremely well, if you can provide us with the final rates that Sehgal Systems is going to offer, this time around too.”

The woman thought for a while. “Twenty lakhs.”

“That’s more than we paid you the last time.”

“I want half of it when I give you the rates and the other half when you win the contract, which you will. That’s the deal. And, since your company stands to make millions and as you said get an entry into all future software projects possibly, then I think I should get a fat amount for the

information that I can provide you.”

“I am not in a position to sanction that big an amount of money,” the voice told her.

“Then don’t waste my time anymore.”

“OK, you’ll get your money. I’ll ensure I get the authority for giving you that amount. Just get me the rates.”

“You’ll get them as soon as I have them,” she said and disconnected.

## Chapter 30

Kabier was looking around for her everywhere. He tried calling her cell and she didn't answer. She was in the building, in some meeting room for sure, but no one seemed to know exactly which one. He wanted her opinion on the final prices for a new proposal they were sending to an oil company. He had already discussed with Munir and though they had come up with some suggestions, Keya needed to concur as well. But right now, more than anything else he just wanted to see her.

He was really astounded at himself. A few months back if someone would have told him that he would be this wildly in love, he would have laughed in their face. Well, he knew better now. Keya was his life and though he spent as much time as possible with her, he still felt restless when he hadn't seen her for a couple of hours, like today. They had driven to work together and had parted on her floor. Both of them had been so busy that the day had flown by without them meeting each other and now he was missing her. Just being with her made him feel complete, content and so very happy. It was pure magic between them; there was no other way to describe it. He lost himself in her every time they made love. Thinking about her in bed was making him go weak in the knees even now. Yesterday her hands and mouth had worked such frenzy on him that he had plunged inside her desperately; totally uncaring that he hadn't used any protection. That was the second time in a week that he had lost total control, in this way. But then that was Keya. She was as open and honest in her lovemaking as she was in everything else she did.

Unable to find her, he went back to his floor, only to find a group of people coming out of the boardroom. A few of them smiled at him and stopped to talk to him. He found out from them that since all the bigger meeting rooms had been occupied, Keya had decided to use the boardroom for one of their meetings. Smiling now, he excused himself and went into the now empty room and quietly shut the door behind him.

Keya was wiping the white board clean when she felt strong arms enclose her waist from behind. She felt familiar warmth engulf her as Kabier started slowly kissing the side of her neck, just under her chin. She tilted her head, giving him all the access he needed and smiled to herself.

“Hey! I missed you too,” she told him.

“It’s been too long since I last saw you,” Kabier said his lips still on her neck.

He turned her then and lifted her off the ground and placing her on the oval table, bent down and kissed her inviting mouth.

Keya just couldn’t get enough of him. This was sheer madness. They were at work and in a meeting room; anyone could walk in on them. But it was pure bliss the way he was kissing her and she couldn’t or rather didn’t want him to stop. His lips moved from her mouth, down the column of her throat and lower into the vee of her collared shirt. He unbuttoned the top two buttons of her shirt and put his mouth on her exposed cleavage. On a sigh, Keya placed her hands behind her, resting her body weight on them. She shut her eyes and leaned back on her hands, giving him more access to her body, like he wanted.

Somehow all the conference rooms seemed to be occupied today, Trisha thought. Well she could use the boardroom; it was the one least frequently used and would surely be available. Deciding to check on it, she had arrived early with one of the girls from her team. She opened the door and was shocked beyond words. Kabier and Keya were making out on the table in the conference room, in office. It was unbelievable. And they hadn’t even realized that they had an audience.

The girl with Trisha came behind her and peeped inside the room. Looking at the scene in front of her the girl said softly, “Oh. My. God!”

“Trisha, let’s go,” the girl whispered. “They obviously need some privacy.” But Trisha stood there shell shocked, the blood pounding in her head.

The girl tugged her elbow and started pulling her away from the door.

Kabier knew that if he didn’t stop soon, he wouldn’t be able to stop at all. This was beyond crazy. He should have at least taken her to his office where they would have had more privacy to do what he was doing. A sane corner of his mind was convincing him to put an end to this indulgence before someone walked in on them.

Suddenly, from the corner of his eye he saw a movement at the door. It didn’t take him a moment to lift Keya off the table and tuck her head under his chin, her back to the door, her exposed body covered by his chest. Still in a daze, Keya tried to move away from his wall of a chest to look at his face, to ask him what happened when she heard him speak.

“Uh! Hi Girls!” Kabier said, casually.

Oh no! Keya thought. This was not happening. She buried her head further into Kabier’s chest totally embarrassed.

“Hi Kabier!” a giggly girly voice said.

“Hi,” Trisha said.

Heavens how many people had witnessed them like this? She tried to turn her head to look, but Kabier held her firmly in place.

“You guys obviously want to use the room, so if you’ll excuse us for a few minutes, you can have it,” Kabier told them confidently.

The moment the girls left, he deftly re-buttoned Keya’s shirt and before she could utter a word, he took her hand and guided her out of the room, passing the two open mouthed girls, to go into his own office.

“Oh God! I can’t believe this just happened,” Keya said, the moment she entered Kabier’s office. She put her hands on her flushed cheeks and shook her head. In response he threw his head back and laughed.

“And what is so funny?” Keya asked him angrily. How was he always so in control? He had been so unperturbed and spoken to the two girls like it was an everyday thing to walk in on your big boss making out in a conference room.

“It was funny. You should have seen the look on their faces.”

“Kabier, you have single handedly managed to create the biggest scandal that Sehgal Systems has ever witnessed,” Keya said, extremely upset.

“Oh come on! Everyone knows by now that we are involved and those who didn’t will know now for sure. And in any case how does it matter? We are going to get married.”

“No, we are not getting married.”

“You do realize that after yesterday or the one time before, you might be pregnant already.”

Aghast, Keya simply stared at him, the implication of his words sinking in.

“So, we are getting married, no matter what you say,” Kabier said, folding his arms.

Keya looked at him disbelievingly. “I am not going to marry you just because of a baby.” She took a deep breath. “Besides we don’t know for sure yet.”

“I don’t care! If there is a baby on the way, we’re getting married, whether you like it or not,” Kabier told her with certainty.



“No! If there is a baby, I will not marry you just for the baby’s sake and that’s final,” Keya said rebelliously.

They glared at each other, each unimpressed by what the other was trying to say.

“Keya, I have told you before, no child of mine will be born without my name.”

“And I told you at the same time, that it’s not necessary to marry for a child to be born.”

“What is your problem Keya? I’ve already asked you to marry me and now if you are carrying my child, why are you still resisting? What do I have to do to prove to you that I am serious and committed to you?”

“When you figure out the answer to that, we’ll talk of marriage and babies and everything else. Till then just lay off.” Keya stormed out.

She was so furious with him. Keya walked towards her own office, pensive. And what the hell had gotten into her anyways. She used to be such a private person and she had gotten carried away with him, that too in a conference room, for heaven’s sake.

She had recognized Trisha’s voice and if she knew Trisha, by now everyone would have heard about how Keya was caught making out with the boss. Oh God! This was going to be embarrassing as hell. She sat down on her desk and put her head in her hands. Would anyone ever take her seriously?

In his typical way, he was trying to push her into marriage and she was not going to have any of it. She was not going to marry him until she was sure of his love for her, and that was that. Yes, she knew that he genuinely cared for her, but love he hadn’t mentioned even once. Truth be told, she had never openly accepted what she felt for him either. Well, their relationship was out in the open now and she had to figure out what she wanted to do about it.

“Don’t they look great together?” the girl asked Trisha excitedly the moment Kabier and Keya rushed past them into Kabier’s office.

Uncaring that Trisha didn’t reply she just went on to add, “I think they’ll get married for sure.”

“What makes you say that?” Trisha asked.

“Well, Keya hasn’t given the time of day to any of the guys we have in office and I am sure that many have fallen for her at one time or the other. And now she is with Kabier. I am sure he must be serious about her for her to

risk doing what they were caught doing right now in office.”

“Kabier is not going to marry her,” Trisha said.

“You don’t know that. Didn’t you see the way he was trying to shield her from us? Wow, so romantic!”

Trisha stopped listening to her after that. Keya was becoming a constant thorn in her side. The last time she had seen them together, Keya had made it pretty obvious that Kabier was hers. She had silently given a “Lay off” message to Trisha in the most womanly way possible. So she had kind of accepted that she might not receive an invite for Sheena’s wedding. Well, she was sick of Keya interfering in her plans for a long time now. Keya needed to be taught a lesson. Once and for all she needed to get Keya out of her way so that she could continue her own agenda with Kabier Sehgal. Trisha Mehta always got what she wanted, no matter what the cost. She would get him too, she promised herself.

Kabier entered his grandfather’s office at a loss. He just didn’t seem to be doing anything right where Keya was concerned. But what? He was sure that she loved every moment of being with him as much as he did. So, for the life of him he couldn’t understand why she was so vehement in her refusal to marry him.

His grandfather looked up when he entered.

“You look like hell.”

“I feel like it too,” Kabier said. He sat on one of the sofas in the corner, massaging his temples with his hands. Janak came and sat in front of him.

“What’s going on?” Janak asked.

“Keya refuses to marry me.”

“I didn’t know you had proposed; that’s great. Congratulations.”

“Are you even listening to what I said? I proposed and she refused.”

“Hmm...”

“I mean, I’ve tried my best to show her how serious and committed I am to her. I love her like crazy, but she just doesn’t get the point. How do I convince her that I really want to spend the rest of my life with her?”

“Does she know that you are in love with her?”

“Of course she knows that I love her, like I know she loves me. Why do you think that I proposed to her? I wouldn’t have if I wasn’t in love with her.”

Janak sighed, “Have you told her that you love her?”

Kabier looked at his grandfather, suddenly dumbfounded. To think of it, he hadn't actually told Keya even once that he was in love with her. He had just presumed that she understood from the way he did things for her, cared for her. After all it was in this same way that he had understood that she was in love with him. It showed in her eyes when she smiled at him or held him while he was sleeping or the myriad other things, that he knew, she did specially for him.

"No, I haven't. But it's pretty obvious."

"Kabier, you have to look at it from her point of view. She has seen her mother enter a marriage believing she was in love and never having that love reciprocated, ever. She is bound to be skeptical."

Kabier linked his hands together and rested his chin on them. His grandfather was probably right. Coming from her background, Keya was bound to be wary of their situation. The more he thought of it, the more he agreed with what his grandfather had said. Maybe she needed to be told that he was in love with her. He would have told her earlier, but just hadn't thought it was important to say it in words. He had shown her how he felt for her several times in several ways. Perhaps in her case he needed to put his actions into words.

Feeling elated he got up and said, "You have just solved it for me, old man. Thanks."

"Hey, who you calling old?" Janak said, standing up. Kabier laughed and quickly left.

Keya was pacing her hall, waiting for Kabier nervously. He had called and told her he was on his way to her place and that he had something important to talk about. Well, she wanted to talk to him too.

"Hey you," Kabier said entering her house. He took her hand and kissed it. "We need to talk."

"Let me say something first," Keya led him inside, to one of the sofas and sat him down on it. She sat next to him, still holding his hand and staring deeply into his eyes said, "Kabier I am in love with you."

He started to say something, but she stopped him with her hand and continued, "No, please. I don't want you to say anything in return. I have been in love with you for ever so long but I was scared to tell you earlier. But I am not afraid any more. I mean it's okay if you're not in love with me. But a marriage cannot be based on one sided love so..."

Kabier didn't let her finish. He put his finger on her lips and said,

“That was to be my line tonight. I came to tell you the same thing. I love you too baby. I thought you already knew and understood that.”

Keya was so shocked that she couldn't get a word through.

Kabier held both her hands in his.

“I love you,” Kabier said simply. “I don't know how, I don't know when, but you stole my heart. My heart belongs to you. I belong to you. When we are together, it's just magic. You are my destiny. There's no better way to explain it. I love you so much that even imagining a life without you is unacceptable to me. And I knew all along that you loved me. Though hearing it makes me feel great.”

“Oh Kabier I...” Keya stopped in mid-sentence when she saw Kabier fishing out a small velvet box from his pocket.

He opened it to reveal a huge diamond solitaire ring. “I am going to do it right this time. Be mine Keya and let me love you forever and keep you happy forever. Will you marry me?”

“I love you Kabier. I never expected this. Oh yes, I will marry you and spend the rest of my life loving you too.”

Kabier slipped the ring on her left hand's ring finger. “That's a perfect fit Kabier.”

Kabier smiled sheepishly. “I have to admit, I had some help here.”

“Who?”

“Later, first I need to do this.” He came forward, held her face in his hands and kissed her smiling lips.

“Kabier Sehgal, I love you so much and it was killing me thinking that you wanted me only for the wild chemistry that we have.”

“Keya sweetheart, I think I was enchanted by you the first time that we met.”

“You mean in the corridor?”

“No earlier. Remember that time ten years back...”

“No, you too?” Keya asked, surprised.

Kabier raised one eyebrow and grinned mischievously.

“Hey wait a minute,” he said “but you didn't even want to talk to me then, you were so cold.”

“What did you expect? My heart was beating so hard, it was unbelievable. I could barely get a word through. I couldn't have you thinking that I was some brainless friend of your sister's. So I just kept quiet and tried

to ignore you.”

Kabier laughed recalling that moment.

“Well, it’s taken us a long time to find each other. I am never letting you go now.”

Keya’s phone rang and Raashi screamed on the line, “Have you said yes? Can we all come in now?”

“What? Where are you?” Keya asked.

“Outside your door, silly,” Raashi replied and disconnected.

“You’ve told Raashi...”

“And Sheena and Sameer and Rishi and grandfather,” Kabier said happily.

“Now I get how the ring fits perfectly.” Keya smiled back. She was so happy.

“But what if I had refused?” she asked teasingly.

“No chance! I spoke to grandfather and he got it out of me that I hadn’t told you in words that I love you yet and how that may be of importance. And after realizing that, I was convinced that’s what was stopping you from accepting me. So...” Kabier smiled.

Keya hugged him, not wanting to let go, but the doorbell was pealing.

Keya opened the door to reveal the whole bunch of special people who cared for the two of them. Sheena, Rajiv, Raashi, Sameer and Rishi all trooped in shouting and screaming in joy. Finally Janak entered and leaving the rest behind, Keya went up to him and gave him a big hug. He was such a dear man. He had been making things right for her, for as long as she could remember. “Thank You. You have done so much for me. More than I can ever repay you for.”

“No Keya, you three, my angels, have made my life meaningful. I have just returned to you some of the happiness that you have given me. And by the way, you have made me even happier by agreeing to be a part of my family. I think your grandfather must be smiling down from heaven today.”

“But, Kabier’s mom?” Keya asked concerned, she didn’t know yet if she had accepted her.

“I spoke to mom and she’s fine,” Kabier said. “She’ll come around tomorrow and talk to you. But before that..”

Kabier handed his cell to her. She raised her eyebrows questioning him. He just handed her the phone and nodded towards it, smiling.

Keya was surprised to hear her brother Akash’s voice on the other end.

He was ecstatic with joy and so happy for her. Kabier had declared his intentions towards her on the phone to him. And Akash couldn't be more thrilled for her.

Keya spoke to him for a short while and hung up with a promise to call him as soon as she could to discuss the wedding plans with him. She handed the phone back to Kabier. "That was really sweet of you. Thank you." He gave her a broad grin in response.

Kabier watched Sheena and Raashi getting all the details from Keya and then study her ring with a lot of feminine chatter. Girls! They were all the same. His grandfather joined them and they included him into their group, as they always had been doing for years.

"I can't believe it, you're finally getting married," Sameer said.

"Me neither. I am really happy for you Kabier," Rishi said.

"Thanks. I can't believe that just a few months back, I didn't even believe in love, let alone that it could ever happen to me," Kabier said honestly.

Rajiv said, "I never thought it would be like this for me either, until I met Sheena, and now I think I was a fool to believe I could ever escape the clutches of love."

"Looks like Sheena's spread her marriage bug. Watch out Sameer. You know you are next," Rishi said, teasing his older brother.

"No way, little brother. The marriage path is not for me to walk on," Sameer said ending the conversation.

Raashi came towards Kabier then and pulling him to one side, said, "I am sorry. I didn't know that you were so serious about her." She was referring to their heated conversation in Goa.

"I could have told you back then, but we were just about discovering each other. I didn't want you or Sheena to influence her in anyway positive or negative."

"So are we okay now?" Raashi asked him.

"We were always okay." Kabier smiled and gave her a hug.

# Chapter 31

Trisha read the newspaper in disgust. Every paper had an article on them. She picked up another paper that had on its front page, “Kabier Sehgal engaged to marry!” The tabloids were labeling it the wedding of the year. She saw a picture of Kabier and Keya accompanying the article. They were standing in front of his car, his arm protectively encircling her waist. She couldn’t believe she had lost to Keya again. She shut the papers slowly. Maybe this rivalry had to end once and for all now.

Keya’s wedding planning was going on in full swing. Mina Sehgal, Kabier’s mom had come to visit Keya the very next day as Kabier had said she would. She had understood and accepted her son’s decision, albeit reluctantly at first. Both Sheena and Kabier had been very upset with her behavior with Keya and had convinced her to accept the truth about Keya. Eventually she had come around and although it was a bit awkward between them at first, Keya still made it a point to call her often and take her advice on how to proceed with the wedding.

Keya had always wanted a small wedding, not too loud and not too many people. Kabier had accepted her choice with no reservations. The wedding was to take place in a month’s time. Neither of them wanted a longer wait.

But a month was not a long time and with all the wedding preparations yet to be done, Raashi and Sheena convinced Keya to leave work early to go shopping with them. They were to meet her at an exclusive designer store in South Mumbai to select her wedding outfit. Her wedding outfit! In a few weeks she was going to marry Kabier, it still needed getting used to. Keya was so excited and it was all happening so fast. She parked her car in a narrow street and as she got out of the car and was locking it, someone grabbed her from behind. She panicked and twisted to try and free herself. But before she could open her mouth to scream a cloth was jammed on her nose and mouth and in the next moment she lost consciousness.

Kabier had been working late in the evening when the call he had been waiting for came through. He knew Keya was out shopping with the other two of her trio and he and his cousins were meeting the girls later for dinner. Both Rishi and Sameer were meeting him here at his office first. He lifted his

cell expectantly.

“Kabier, it’s done. The contact has been made. I have been informed about your rates and they match what you told me,” Rithwik said on the phone.

Kabier tapped his fingers on his desk. His plan, it seemed, was working. “Tell me more Rithwik.”

“As we had decided in London, I pushed strongly for this particular deal in my management meeting, so everyone of importance in my company knew that I wanted to win this deal at any cost. I lowered the rates such that the two of us were the only contenders left. My sales director came to me a few days back requesting a sanction of a huge amount of money that he wanted in order to get your rates. On quizzing further, I found out that a manager from his team was in contact with a source from your company who had indeed been used in the past also, for the ACC deal as you suspected rightly. But unlike then, this time, the source asked for a much larger amount of money and that needed my direct approval. I allowed the transfer of funds and found out from the manager directly involved that it is indeed a woman from your company.”

“But how can that be?” Kabier said. “Keya is the only one who has access to this information.”

“It is a woman Kabier. This guy said that he had attended a common conference, where people from Sehgal Systems were also present. He had met a number of your staff and sometime after this conference, he got a call from this woman, who claimed to be in a top position in your company and she gave him the details for the ACC deal.”

“How does he contact her and which account does he pay the money to? That information can help us.”

“He sends her an email. It’s some vague ID and she calls him from a different number each time. Also the last time he had deposited the money to a numbered account. I know you wanted to replay the whole thing so that the contact could be made again and we could find out more, but unfortunately it’s just drawn a blank.”

Kabier thought for a while and couldn’t come up with anything more that he could ask of him, and so he hung up with a promise to get back to him in case he thought of anything else.

Kabier got up from his desk and stood at the glass windows that lined a wall of his office. He put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the



glass pane assimilating his thoughts.

Eclipse and Fortuna had been the two companies that had paid someone from within Sehgal Systems to get information regarding their rates in the past.

During the Austrian deal Eclipse had been a strong contender and had almost won until Kabier had changed the rates at the last minute. Which would mean that then too, in all probability, their rates had been leaked.

This time, he had planned with Rithwik that only the two of them would be the remaining contenders for this Oil Company's contract. They had discussed the rates and then proposed them, thus ensuring this happened. And he had recommended that Rithwik announce to his team that he wanted to win this contract at all costs so that his people would be confident to come forward and pay for the information on Sehgal Systems final rates. And the plan had worked so far.

But who was the informant? Kabier shook his head and started pacing. He was surely going about this the wrong way. He started thinking again. Only three people knew of the rates that Sehgal Systems offered for any deal, Kabier, Keya and her boss Munir. During the Austrian deal, Kabier had changed the rates without informing the other two and now during this deal...

Oh God! Kabier wondered, why hadn't he realized this earlier on?

He had meant to talk to Keya about the rates for the oil contract, but he had forgotten all about it when they had started making out in the meeting room and then later with their wedding planning and everything else, he had not had a chance to update her at all. So the only person who knew the rates, other than him, had been Munir.

This meant that Munir was the one supplying the information to someone. That was the only possibility. In fact the more he pondered over it; it felt like the most obvious answer.

Kabier tried to recollect exactly what the report from the investigative agency had detailed. He remembered clearly the report stating that the informant was a woman who claimed to be having an affair with the top boss. And everything had conveniently pointed to Keya.

But Munir was also in an important position in the company and right up till now he had been the number two guy in charge. The more he thought over it, the more likely it seemed that Munir was involved in this somehow.

"Hey Kabier!" Sameer said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Hey buddy, what's up? You look vexed? Having second thoughts

about getting married are we?” Rishi asked, joking. Kabier made a face at him.

The two of them had come into this office and were making themselves comfortable on the leather couches in the room.

“Hey guys! I think I may have finally figured out who is responsible for selling Sehgal Systems rates,” Kabier told them.

“Really? Do tell.” Rishi said.

“Let’s go to grandfather’s office. I need his opinion on this one,” Kabier said and walked out of his office leaving the two of them to follow behind.

# Chapter 32

Janak was surprised to see all three of his grandsons enter his office at the same time.

“Hello! All three of you together! Is there a problem?” he asked shrewdly.

Sameer took a seat in front of his grandfather’s desk and Rishi waited for Kabier to take the other. But Kabier simply waved at him to take the seat. He was too anxious and excited to sit. He paced a bit, putting his thoughts together, uncaring that three pairs of eyes were watching his every step.

“Can someone tell me what is going on?” Janak asked, looking at each of his grandsons. The other two just shrugged and looked towards Kabier for an answer.

Kabier took a deep breath. “Do you remember those ACC deals I had got investigated after Rishi was tipped of regarding some foul play?” he asked his grandfather.

Janak nodded.

“Well, I have been working to figure out who is selling the company’s quotation rates and I think I may have figured it out.”

Kabier took a moment and explained how he had worked together with Rithwik, to be the last two contenders remaining for the oil company’s proposal and how his team had gotten to know Sehgal Systems rates.

The three men listened to him, bewildered by his explanation.

“Rithwik just called me. He had our rates with him, but he couldn’t find out who had supplied the rates. The only information he was certain about was that a woman was behind it.”

“And?” Rishi asked.

“Well, here’s my theory. You all know that I have deliberately gotten involved in all the sales cases that Sehgal Systems is working on. So, at any given time there are only three people that know the final rates that we are proposing, Keya, Munir and I. No one, other than the three of us knows the final rates. And in the case of this oil contract Keya and I have been so busy with ourselves that I didn’t get a chance to discuss the final rates with her. It was just Munir and I who finalized the proposal and sent it. So it looks like he’s the one.”

“Munir? I can’t believe it,” Janak said.

“But you said that it was a woman,” Sameer specified.

“The report from the agency specifically stated that the woman responsible claimed to be having an affair with the top boss in the company.”

“Which Munir was until you came in and started getting involved, right?” Rishi said, excitedly.

“And even when grandfather was responsible, Munir was running the show most of the time, as grandfather was always busy with the other businesses he had to run, right?” Sameer added.

“Exactly,” Kabier said.

Janak looked thoughtful. Kabier looked at his grandfather. “That’s why I need your help. You have known him for so many years. What do you think? Is there anything that has happened recently in his life that could cause him to give away company secrets?”

“Well there was his divorce three years back. But that is neither here nor there. I just find it hard to believe that Munir could be the one,” Janak replied.

“But it could be that he is having an affair since the divorce or it could have been the cause of it,” Rishi said.

“What else, grandfather?” Kabier asked, gently.

“I don’t know if this is an important detail, but Keya who has been working closely with him for years, told me she was concerned about his health and that he hadn’t been his usual self for quite a while. At times he’s extremely temperamental and at other times perfectly normal. She came to me one day worried that he may be sick or that he is on some anti-depressants or something. But when I met him, he seemed fine and I convinced her otherwise.”

Kabier began pacing again. Keya had been worried about Munir. Was this related in any way to his selling the company secrets?

“Call him,” Kabier said, to his grandfather.

“What?” Janak replied.

“Right here, right now. Let’s confront him. I know it in my gut, he’s involved somehow.”

“I agree,” Sameer said.

“Me too,” Rishi chipped in.

Janak picked up his cell and dialed Munir’s cell number and convinced him to come and meet him.

“He’s coming. I hope you know what you’re doing Kabier.”

Kabier nodded his head.

There was a knock on the door and Munir entered to a room filled with silence. He was clearly surprised to see all of Janak’s grandsons in the same room.

“Oh! I thought you were alone. I didn’t expect...” he looked pointedly at the three younger Sehgal’s.

Kabier looked at him carefully. His face seemed more sallow and pale than usual and he had dark rings around his eyes. He looked edgy as he nervously shifted his eyes from each of the men in the room.

“Hello Munir,” Kabier said, “Why don’t you take a seat?”

“Janak, what’s going on?” Munir asked.

“Please sit Munir, Kabier wants to talk to you about something.”

Reluctantly he sat down. Kabier took a seat opposite him.

“Since how long have you been addicted?” Kabier asked him carefully.

“What? What are you talking about?” Munir asked, agitated now.

“We know Munir. We all do. You’re hooked onto drugs right?” Kabier asked confidently, convinced that his guess had been bang on target.

“We can see it Munir, the ad hoc behavior, the edginess, the changes in your complexion and face when there has been a long gap since your last intake. They all add up,” Kabier said gently.

Munir covered his face with his hands, an air of shame and dejection emanated from him.

Janak came forward and put a hand on his shoulder. “We only want to help you. Help us help you old friend. Tell us everything.”

Munir took a deep breath and said, “She started entrapping me three years ago. I was a happily married man until she decided that she wanted me and she always gets what she wants. That’s just the way she is.”

Kabier looked discreetly from his grandfather to his cousins. They all understood what he was silently telling them. He had been right. Munir was having an affair with someone. They were this close to finding out who was behind it all. But he didn’t want to interrupt Munir. He wanted to hear it all.

“But I have only myself to blame for being seduced by her charms. I let her into my life and it cost me my marriage. My wife suspected that I was involved with someone and on a hunch she followed me to my farmhouse and found me with her. After that day, my marriage was over. She walked out

with the kids and filed for divorce. I fought her all along but eventually I gave up. She wanted the kids and half of the money I had and I gave it all to her. It was decent of her never to mention my affair, even when the divorce proceedings were going on. She didn't want the children to live with the fact that their father was caught in the arms of another woman."

He paused for a moment, looking in the distance. "Do you know she never even asked me once who the other woman was? She just wanted out, that's it."

Munir looked at Janak. "I have been such a fool. I lost my wife and kids because I couldn't say no to that crazy woman. And she tricked me; I found out much later that she was slowly mixing the drug 'Ecstasy' in my drink, every time I was with her. I used to think that the brief time I spent with her made me feel young again, alive again. Foolishly I never realized then that it was the drug taking its effect. And then slowly I started realizing that my body craved for something even when I wasn't with her. That's when she told me about the drug and how she was the only one who had access to it. She knew I was firmly in her clutches when I started asking for it on my own. And, yes, she would give it to me, but always at a price. It was always, some information that she was after, like some new policy changes in the company or the rates at which we were proposing a contract. Whatever she wanted I gave her. I have been too weak to do anything about it before. And then recently she started targeting Keya."

"What?" Kabier asked, worried now. "Who is this woman you're talking about?"

"I am surprised someone as astute as you hasn't already guessed who I've been talking about. It has been Trisha all along."

Kabier fell back onto his chair his mouth open, completely taken aback. Trisha, he thought. She was the one behind all this?

"What did you say about Keya?" Janak asked.

Looking at Janak he said, "Initially she hated the fact that you were training Keya yourself. She has always wanted what Keya has had. First it was the position and then it was Kabier."

"What?" Kabier asked.

"Yes, it's true. Trisha hated the fact that Keya got such a senior position in the company. Soon after that she started the rumors about a possible affair between Janak and Keya. But no one really took that seriously. And then you came along and Trisha was thrilled that Keya and you couldn't

see eye to eye. And then things started changing between Keya and you. But Trisha refused to accept that. She has always wanted you Kabier and she still does. I think the announcement about your engagement has made her crazier than ever. She's mentally sick, I am sure of it. I have seen the violent streak slowly building up inside her and I worry about what she will do next."

"But why tell us all this now and not earlier?" Sameer asked, for the first time.

"Some days back I think she caught Keya and you making out in a meeting room and after that she hasn't been the same since. I saw her in a fit of rage like never before."

"You were caught in a meeting room..." Rishi said, looking at Kabier, his eyes wide as saucers unable to believe that his usually so in control cousin was caught making out in an office meeting room. He had a smirk on his face and was about to say something more when Sameer glared at him. He promptly shut up.

Munir continued, "And the next day when Kabier's engagement was announced she was as cool as a cucumber, when she met me. When I asked her how she was feeling, she told me that she had taken care of the Keya problem once and for all. I don't want anything to happen to Keya. I was considering talking to you, rather gathering the courage to talk to you since the last few days, but... And then you called me in here, right now. So..."

There was pin drop silence all around. Kabier still found it hard to believe that Trisha was dangerous. He had known her for a really long time, could she really cause any harm to Keya. Was she capable of all Munir was claiming?

"I've known Trisha for three years, very closely. She lets things out when she talks to me, confident that I could never go against her. After all she is the one who gets me the drug that my body craves. But I am not afraid anymore. I need help and I am going to take it. I am going to build my life from scratch again."

Munir looked at Kabier. "Kabier, I am serious when I say that she has planned something to harm Keya. Trisha is irrational."

Kabier understood what Munir was trying to tell him. He stood up and quickly pulled out his phone and dialed Keya's cell. Her phone was switched off. Worried now, he tried again, but he got the same message. Keya's phone was switched off.

"What is it Kabier?" Sameer asked, seeing the worry on Kabier's face.

“I can’t get through Keya’s phone. It’s switched off.”



# Chapter 33

Suddenly Kabier's phone rang. "It's from Sheena." He knew that the three of them were together. Keya had to be fine, he told himself.

"Kabier, thank God, I got to you," Sheena said amidst tears.

"Sheena what's wrong?" Kabier asked, panicking.

Sameer and Rishi came to stand beside him.

Sheena said something incoherent, something about Keya, another girl seeing something. He just couldn't make out what Sheena was saying as Sheena was crying really hard.

"Sheena calm down and tell me what is going on," he yelled.

He heard Raashi's voice on the phone.

"Raashi what is going on? Where is Keya?" Kabier asked.

"Kabier, I am not sure, but I think Keya's been kidnapped." Raashi got straight to the point in her usual efficient way.

"What?" Kabier couldn't believe what he had just heard.

"Sheena and I were to meet Keya at a store and we got late. Keya's car was parked here; but her cell phone was lying broken on the ground. Next to it were her car keys and her hand bag. We got worried and went inside the store and they told us she had not gone in there. We opened her car to see if we could find something, when this girl came up to us and told us that she lives across the street and she saw a girl being taken away by two goons to be precise. Sheena showed her a picture of Keya that she had on her cell and the girl identified her. Kabier, we are so worried. You have to do something."

Kabier shut his eyes. This couldn't be happening. Not Keya. If something happened to her... NO! He was not going down that road. He had to think positive!

"Kabier, what's wrong?" Sameer asked very concerned now.

"It's Keya. She's been kidnapped," Kabier said, slowly.

"Give me the phone."

"Raashi, Sameer here. Tell me again, exactly what has happened," Sameer asked her earnestly.

He heard Raashi repeat everything. "Raashi, I know this is hard for you. But I want you to listen to me carefully. You need to do exactly as I say,

okay?”

“Yes,” Raashi replied, her voice now choked with tears that she had been controlling for so long.

“This girl who has seen the whole thing, I want you to bring her here to Kabier’s office, right now. I don’t care how you convince her Raashi, but you get her here to us, you get me?”

“Yes,” Raashi said.

“Be strong Raashi. We need you right now. Keya needs you. Come as soon as you can. And Raashi, be careful.”

He hung up the phone and looked at Kabier who was still standing there in shock, unable to get a word out.

“Can one of you explain what the hell is going on?” Janak asked loudly.

Sameer explained the entire situation.

“It’s Trisha, I am sure it is,” Munir said. “I told you she said she had taken care of the Keya problem once and for all. It has to be her behind this.”

“I am going to kill her,” Kabier said walking towards the door. Rishi stepped out in front of him.

“Get out of my way, Rishi,” Kabier growled. “I am going to find her and make her pay for doing this to Keya.”

“No, Kabier. She might harm her even more if she suspects that you know something. No. There has to be some other way,” Rishi said.

“Will you just let me go? While you’re wasting time talking something seriously bad may be happening to Keya. I have to get to her.”

Sameer came forward and held Kabier by the shoulder. He said calmly, “Rishi is right. Going to confront Trisha is not the answer. For starters she may not even be in office right now or at her home. By confronting her, you will just scare her off. Let’s deal with this differently.”

“Sameer, the woman I love is in danger and you ask for different options to deal with this. I am going. I am not staying here one more minute.”

Sameer shook him. “Kabier listen to me. You are not thinking straight. By leaving now you’ll cause more harm to Keya than good. So just wait a minute and listen to what I have to say.”

“Fine, you have one minute. Tell me something to convince me to stay,” Kabier roared.

“Veejay Bellani,” Sameer said quietly.

“What?” Kabier asked surprised.

“I am calling Veejay now. He’ll help us deal with this.”

“He isn’t even in the city. Last I heard he was working on a case in Delhi.”

“Veejay is back in town. He spoke to me a few days back. He’ll come right away, you’ll see.”

Kabier turned to see Sameer dialing a number on his cell. If there was anyone Kabier could blindly turn to, for help in times like this, then it would undoubtedly be his friend Veejay Bellani, expert on special undercover operations with the crime branch.

Sameer quickly dialed the number and put it on speaker phone for all to hear.

“Veejay! Hi, Sameer here.”

“Sameer, my man, how are you buddy?”

“We need your help Veejay. There’s a problem,” Sameer updated Veejay on the situation with Keya.

Finally, Sameer asked him, “So, can you help?”

“Need you ask? Am on my way; keep talking to me buddy. Is there anyone you guys suspect?”

Sameer told him everything that he had learnt about Munir and Trisha in the last hour.

Veejay listened attentively. “I need Trisha’s address and photograph emailed to me ASAP.”

“Okay, I’ll get onto it.”

“Okay Sameer, I am going to hang up now. I’ll be there in ten minutes, at the most. In the meanwhile, send me the mail.” Veejay disconnected the call.

“Kabier, he’s coming. He’ll be here in ten minutes. Trust me, he’ll find her for you. You know he’s the best at what he does,” Sameer said to Kabier, who was looking more and more distraught by the minute.

“Who is this guy?” Janak asked Sameer.

“Veejay Bellani is a top cop in the crime branch, an expert in covert operations,” Sameer replied.

“And he is our friend,” Rishi said. “I didn’t know he was back. But, seriously, I am glad he is here to help.”

Sameer and Rishi searched through the employee database of Sehgal

Systems from Janak's laptop. They quickly found Trisha's picture and address and emailed it to Veejay.

Keya woke up feeling dizzy and strange. Her hands and feet were tied uncomfortably and she was lying on the floor. She suddenly realized what had happened to her and she panicked, fearing the worst had taken place. But she didn't feel violated in any way and her clothing was completely intact. Feeling slightly relieved she scanned her surroundings, trying to remain calm in the face of the severe panic that was threatening to overwhelm her.

She was in a room, with a bed and a window by the side that was boarded completely. She sat up with difficulty. She was tied so tightly that it was tough to move.

Why had she been kidnapped? That's what had obviously happened. It had all happened so fast and suddenly, that she hadn't even had time to see who had kidnapped her. Was it for ransom? If that was the case, they would be negotiating with Kabier right now. Oh God! Kabier must be worried sick about her. This couldn't be happening to her, not now. She had finally found happiness and she couldn't believe that she was going to lose it so soon. No, she wiped the tears streaming down her cheeks on the sleeves of her shirt. She had to be strong to get through this ordeal. She looked around for any means of escape but couldn't find any. Resigned she waited anxiously.

The door to Janak's office opened and Sheena rushed in, tears streaming down her face. She went and hugged Kabier and cried uncontrollably into his shoulder. He led her to the sofa where their grandfather was seated and handed her over to him. He was stressed enough already and Sheena crying was getting him more agitated and upset with the whole situation.

Sameer went up to Raashi and asked, "Is she the one?" referring to the girl standing shyly behind her.

Raashi nodded.

"Come here Raashi," Sameer held his arms wide open. Raashi stepped into his arms and wept softly. He held her close, letting her cry, understanding how she felt.

"It's my fault Sameer, I got late. If I had been ten minutes earlier, Keya would be here with us."

"No Raashi, you're not at fault here. No one is to blame," Sameer told her.

Raashi stepped back and looking at him said, "Tell me, you'll find her that nothing will happen to her."

Sameer bent forward, so that his face was at level with hers. "We'll find her, I promise. She'll be fine."

All of them turned as the door opened again and a man in his early thirties, smartly dressed in a formal suit and tie walked in. Kabier went up to him immediately and they shook hands, looking into each other's eyes silently.

The man broke the silence.

"I will find her Kabier. You know you can trust me."

Kabier nodded silently. Sameer came up and said, "Everyone, this is Veejay Bellani, he is going to help us find Keya."

"OK, what have we here?" Veejay said taking control.

"This is the girl that saw Keya being taken," Raashi said.

"And you are?" Veejay asked.

"I am Raashi, Keya's friend."

"Yes, you're the one that described the incident in detail to Sameer," Veejay remarked. "Well! Let us talk to her then," he said, pointing to the girl.

"She's Lina," Raashi informed him, pulling the girl forward. A young girl of about eighteen years stepped forward timidly from behind Raashi.

"Lina, you don't need to be afraid. You did a brave thing by coming forward. So why don't you tell me exactly what you saw?" Veejay asked.

Lina described in detail the entire incident. How she was standing by her window and was about to go back in, when she saw Keya park her car on the opposite side of the street. Keya's car, the BMW X6, was what attracted her interest in the first place. She was admiring both the beautiful woman and the car she was driving when she saw, out of nowhere two goons come out from behind Keya and then one of them put his arm around Keya's waist and before she could even move they had covered her nose and mouth with a cloth. Keya had lost consciousness and they had bundled her up and put her in a white van and had sped off. The entire incident happened so quickly that she didn't have time to note the car number, she told them regretfully.

Sameer saw Kabier react very badly to the incident. His face contorted in fury when he heard that the goons had put their hands on Keya. Sameer put his hand on Kabier's arm, holding him tight. Kabier looked at him and Sameer silently shook his head. Any rash reaction was not going to get them closer to Keya.

Veejay next questioned Munir thoroughly. He didn't get into all the details as Sameer had already briefed him on his way here. But he did ask some pointed questions.

"OK Munir, I know Trisha is not at her place as I had that checked out after I got the address from Sameer. Is there any other place that you know she could possibly have access to? Some place that she could keep Keya without any worry or fear of being caught, by snooping neighbors or something like that."

"I am not sure. She doesn't have any family that I have heard of. But, it could be possible..." Munir shook his head and continued, "My farm house is on the outskirts of the city. She has the keys to that. She may have taken Keya there. There is no one there, no servants, no neighbors around, nobody."

"Give me the address," Veejay said.

Veejay then related the address to someone over his cell and said, "I have sent Trisha's picture to the police in the area near the farm house and asked them to check for a white van near the farm house. Let's see what that comes up with. In the meanwhile, I want each of you who know Trisha to describe her to me."

So turn by turn he questioned Munir, Janak and Kabier about her.

"Keya had told me once that Trisha was dangerous. That she was always wary of her. But I just brushed it aside. I guess her female instincts were bang on target where Trisha was concerned. I wish I had listened to her," Kabier lamented, as he also detailed to his friend how Trisha was involved in stealing information from the company and passing it on to their competitors.

Even Raashi and Sheena told Veejay what little they knew of Trisha and what they had seen of her on the yacht. Raashi also described how both Keya and she had seen Trisha stage her fall on the yacht in order to get Kabier's attention.

Listening to all of them, Veejay finally said, "I think she is obsessed with getting everything that Keya has. First it was the job position and now it's Kabier. What may have started out as plain rivalry has become a desperate obsession for Trisha."

Veejay picked up his ringing cell, he moved to the side to talk. When he finished he came back to the waiting group. "I have some news. The local police have confirmed that a white van of a similar description to what Lina

has given, was seen in the driveway of Munir's farm house. Also a fuel pump worker in the area had filled gas for Trisha in her car a while back. So I guess Keya is at the farm house."

"Oh thank God!" Sheena said.

"Kabier, it's not over yet. We don't know for sure whether Keya is alive or not. But..."

"No Veejay! She is alive. I know it," Kabier said.

"In any case we don't have time to waste at all. We have to get this over with immediately. But I can't just barge in there with my people. That may make her panic and do something drastic. Instead, I think the key here is the element of surprise. From what I understand, Trisha wants you. So she'll be shocked when you show up at her door. That will give my people enough time to assemble and disarm any goons lurking in the shadows. I'll be right behind you, so you'll be safe. But you will have to be the first person to go inside. Are you okay with this?" Veejay asked him.

"I'll do anything," Kabier replied.

"But you have to be calm Kabier, for both your sake and for Keya. One mistake and it will all be over. You need to buy us time when you are in there."

Kabier nodded, understanding the implications.

"So let's go. There is a chopper waiting for us at the airbase close by and the rest of the task force has already been dispatched. We will assemble a mile away from the farm house."

"I am coming," Sameer said.

"Me too," Rishi added.

"I am coming too," Raashi said softly.

All the men turned to look at her. Sheena pulled Raashi towards her. "Raashi it's too dangerous, you can't go there."

"No Sheena. I want to be there to see that she is alright. Don't you see it's my fault? If I was early today then she'd be here and all this wouldn't be happening. Kabier I am coming with you guys."

Kabier looked at her adamant face and then turned to Sameer, "Some help please," he whispered.

Sameer stepped forward in the direction of Raashi while Veejay, Rishi and Kabier left the office quietly.

"Raashi, you can't come with us, Sheena's right. It is dangerous," Sameer said gently.

Raashi shook her head and was about to say something when Sameer interrupted. “No, Raashi. Please don’t be difficult about this. I have enough to worry with Kabier going in alone. Don’t add to it by insisting on coming along. Please go with Sheena to Kabier’s house. I promise I’ll get Keya back with me when I return.”

Reluctantly Raashi agreed. “Okay. You take care. I’ll be waiting for you.”



# Chapter 34

It had become pretty dark in the room. Keya had just about gotten accustomed to seeing in the dark, when the door opened and the lights were switched on. Blinded temporarily she stumbled as she tried to sit up. A voice caught her attention, “Well, well, well, the princess is finally awake.”

Keya recognized the voice even though her eyes were still adjusting to the brightness.

“Trisha, I don’t believe this. ‘You’ had me abducted?” Keya blinked as she tried to focus on Trisha’s face through the bright light. She had been left alone for a long time and she had no clue as to how much time had passed since she had been brought here.

“Why would you do this?”

“Oh come on Keya! Do you seriously think that I would let you marry Kabier? He is mine, you know, I want him and I always get what I want. And, you Keya, were proving to be a thorn in my side,” Trisha said scathingly.

“What is your problem with me Trisha? Why do you dislike me so much?”

“You have had everything so easy in life; the job, the promotion and now Kabier. I, on the other hand have had to struggle to get every little thing.”

“That’s not true. You know nothing about me or my past?”

Trisha looked at her contemptuously and spat out at her. “Do you know how difficult it has been for me growing up? My father died when I was young and my mother was a teacher in my school. We barely scraped through our life. I lived on the grudging charity handed out by relatives, for years; even wearing their hand me downs. And then, when I was eighteen and didn’t have fees for college, I had to sleep with a married cousin of mine, for four years whenever he demanded, just so that he would pay my college fees. Do you even realize how humiliating that was? To be so thoroughly used.” Trisha’s eyes were filled with hate.

“And then I joined Sehgal Systems, thanks to Kabier’s reference and for the first time I got something easily, without any struggle. I thought I would work hard and reach the top, which I did. But then you came along.

Initially I thought you were like me, from a middle class background, working hard to make it in life. I really liked you then Keya. But then, suddenly everything changed. Janak Sehgal took a special interest in training you himself. He never did that for anyone, ever. But you were special. He preferred you over everyone. I tried hard to get him to notice me, but he had eyes only for you. And then two years back you were awarded the position that I so desperately wanted, had worked so hard for. And to make things worse, you inherited all that money too.”

Keya looked at her shocked. How did she know?

“I know what you’re dying to ask Keya. I know because I spied on you and eavesdropped on your conversations with Janak Sehgal as often as I could. One afternoon during lunch, the two of you were sitting on a table close by, I heard him discuss your inheritance with you. That’s when I realized that it’s just not a fair world. You had everything, the position, the power and now, even the money. I had to get even with you. So I started spreading rumors about you and Janak. Though no one took them seriously, at least people took a second look when they saw you two together. And I had a better plan. I seduced that fool Munir Chenoy into sleeping with me. He was so easy. I got him addicted to drugs and he became my puppet.”

“My God, it was you! You were the one selling the company secrets.”

“Of course, my dear. Who else could be that ingenious? I let it be known that I was having an affair with the top boss and that’s how I knew the rates. I didn’t even need to give them any names. You were the only woman who had access to that information. If ever there was an enquiry it would all point, very conveniently, towards you. But luck favored you again and my plan did not work,” Trisha said making a face.

“But it worked out fine for me anyways. I made a lot of money selling the Sehgal quotation prices whenever I possibly could. And just like that, I became a princess like you.

Everything seemed to be going fine till Kabier returned to India. I had always wanted him, even in school. And surprise, surprise, he didn’t like you. That was a first for me; someone not liking you. I was so happy. I gave him subtle hints about the rumors going around regarding Janak and you, especially after he saw you two and Janak embracing in Janak’s office. That sight, the look on Kabier’s face was priceless. I was sure at that point of time, that since his hatred for you went so deep he would find some way to get rid of you. But again that didn’t happen. You have been so lucky all the time

Keya. No matter how I tried to get rid of you, I just couldn't. I had my own agenda with Kabier. The night his grandfather fell sick, I had it all planned. I had mixed Ecstasy in his drink and after that, seducing him would have been so easy. But you got in my way again. You called him just as he was about to take a sip and he left me there at the bar, without even a word. Do you know how embarrassing it was for me? Do you?" Trisha shouted.

She was crazy, Keya thought. Why had she never noticed this violent streak in her earlier?

"Trisha, Janak was sick. I had to call Kabier," Keya said gently. But Trisha ignored her.

"You are too smart. Way smarter than I ever gave you credit for, Keya. You set out to entrap Kabier Sehgal and stupid male that he is; he fell for you all the way. Initially I thought it was just a passing fancy and I waited for him to get bored of you. But then I saw how you told me to "Lay off" where he was concerned. I knew then, that I had to take some action soon. I foolishly believed that you wouldn't use your body to distract him, to sleep with him just to take your relationship ahead with him. But you did, didn't you? I saw it. I saw you together in the boardroom. And your plan worked, he proposed to you and you thought you could marry him. That's not happening. You HEAR ME?" Trisha yelled.

"Trisha, I love him. It wasn't a plan. I fell in love with him; just like he is in love with me," Keya tried to make her see reason.

"Love!" Trisha cringed. "There is no such thing as love. And everyone knows Kabier Sehgal doesn't do love. Everyone knows that."

"You're wrong Trisha. He does love me. That's why we're getting married."

"You were getting married. Wake up Keya. You're not going anywhere from here."

"What do you plan to do to me? Isn't this for ransom?" Keya asked, scared now.

Trisha laughed loudly, her laughter resonating around Keya.

"Kabier you need to take off your shirt and wear this first," Veejay held out a bullet proof vest in the van which was now just a few kilometers away from Munir's farm house.

Kabier looked at the bullet proof vest in Veejay's hands and did as he asked. When he was done Veejay pinned a small microphone, the size of a button on his shirt pocket.

“With this, we’ll be able to hear everything when you are inside. And Kabier, no sudden moves, no reactions; okay?”

“Okay,” said Kabier.

“Please take care out there,” Sameer said.

“I will,” Kabier said confidently.

“Ready?” Veejay asked.

“Yes, let’s do this.” Kabier was raring to get to Keya.

“Ransom?” Trisha said, cringing. “Why would I need ransom money, when I can have the whole Sehgal bank balance? Still naïve as ever Keya!”

Keya didn’t understand what she was saying.

“You see Keya, once I get you out of the way, after a sufficient period of mourning, Kabier will recover and then automatically I step into the picture. And I know how to charm him. So you see; I win in the end. He will be mine. All that I need to do is to get rid of you.”

“Trisha you need help. This is not normal. Get me out of here and I can help you.”

“Shut up Keya!” Trisha said. “Let me concentrate. Hmmm... I think the easiest way to kill you will be a drug overdose. But that’s too quick. No suffering. I could shoot you...” Trisha said trailing off as she pulled out a gun from her pocket and waved it in front of Keya’s frightened face.

“But again, that’s too easy. So I think I will hand you over to the goons, waiting outside, to do as they please. After they are done with you, you’ll hate yourself every time you look in the mirror.”

Before Keya could respond there was a loud noise like a door bell ringing. Then there were footsteps outside the door. Trisha stood up suddenly and left the room. Keya heard some muffled voices and then one of the biggest, ugliest men she had ever seen came into the room and pulled her up roughly and covered her mouth with his large hand. Fear ripped through her like a knife. What was happening outside and what was going to happen to her now, she wondered.

“Kabier!” Trisha said opening the door.

“Hi Trisha,” Kabier said.

“Uh! Hi! You...Here...How?” Trisha said confused now.

“Nice place you have here. Is it yours?” Kabier asked walking deeper into the one floor villa. He stopped in front of a pair of wide glass doors that opened to a garden.

“Yes. No. I mean, it’s a friend’s,” Trisha replied.

“We have her. She is totally surprised,” Veejay said looking through a pair of night vision binoculars. Sameer and Rishi watched from a distance through similar eye pieces.

“So, you come here often?” Kabier asked politely.

Trisha recovered from her shock more quickly than Kabier expected and said, “What do you want Kabier?”

“Come now Trisha, why so curt? Is that the way you greet an old friend?”

“Why are you really here?” she asked angrily.

Kabier looked at her, his expression changed from casual to serious.

“I want Keya back,” he told her in simple words.

“What makes you think she’s with me?” Trisha replied dispassionately.

“Why Trisha? Why did you do this? I thought you were my friend. You know I want to marry her, then how could you do this to her, to me?”

He came forward, a step closer to her and Trisha reached in her pocket and removed a small revolver.

“Stay where you are, Kabier or ...”

“Oh hell! She has a weapon. Veejay you have to get in there right now,” Sameer whispered.

“Hang on, we need to see Keya first. Need to know she is in there with her.”

Kabier was stunned. No wonder Veejay had him prepared with a life-saving vest. But this was going nowhere. He had to know if Keya was here in this house or not.

He took a step back and put his hands up and said, “Fine. I’ll do whatever you say. Just tell me where Keya is.”

Trisha laughed. Kabier saw her and realized that she really was mentally sick.

“You know it didn’t have to be this way. I was going to win you back. I would have convinced you to marry me and now you have ruined everything by coming here.”

“Trisha, I just need to see Keya once and then I’ll do as you say. Whatever you want,” Kabier pleaded.

Anger flashed in her eyes momentarily and then still pointing the gun at him, she dialed a number from her cell and whispered something into it.

Kabier heard a door open and he turned to see a large man dragging an unwilling Keya outside. Her hands and feet were both tied. Another goon came towards him and stood behind Trisha.

Keya saw Kabier outside and her eyes full of relief sparkled with pure joy. He had come for her. In the next instant she saw Trisha pointing a gun at Kabier and she froze. The big man who was dragging her, picked her up like a rag doll and flung her across to Kabier.

Kabier caught her as she fell and hauled her straight into his arms. He hugged her tight for a moment, relieved that she was alive.

“Are you alright?” he whispered.

Keya nodded in return.

“Look at you two,” Trisha said.

Hearing her voice, Kabier put Keya behind him, using his body as a shield to protect her.

“I really didn’t think that you had it in you to fall in love Kabier; that too with her of all people! Well, it’s over now. I am going to end it. It’s sad that it has to be this way Kabier, we could have been great together. And Keya, if I can’t have him, neither will you.” Saying this, Trisha fired the gun. A fraction of a second later the door blast open and Veejay and his men entered the room. They immediately got hold of the two big men who was standing inside, watching the show.

The bullet hit Kabier straight in the chest and he fell onto his back with the impact.

“No!” Keya screamed loudly and fell to the ground next to him, just as another bullet whizzed past her arm.

“You are not going to die on me, you hear. I love you Kabier,” she said, holding his face in her hands.

Keya kept raining kisses down on Kabier’s face. “No, stay with me baby. You’re going to be fine.”

Kabier opened his eyes, and saw Keya slumped over his chest crying profusely.

“Keya, I’m fine.” He sat up and untied her hands and feet. The bullet had hit him straight in the chest, but thanks to the bullet proof vest the impact had just knocked him out for a moment.

Keya was in severe shock and she still hadn’t registered that Kabier had come around.

“See, I am okay. Keya look at me,” Kabier said insistently.

Finally Keya looked up. She held his face in his hands and kissed him.  
“Oh God! I thought...”

“No! Look at me, I am absolutely alright. See I am wearing a bullet proof vest.” He put her hand on his chest to satisfy her that he was indeed protected and alright.

“Thank God,” Keya whispered hugging him tight.

She saw Trisha being taken away. It was over. This nightmare was finally over for them.

Kabier hugged her tight and felt some wetness around her arm. He looked down to see blood oozing through her bloodied shirt onto his arm. Keya had been injured by a bullet.

“I need help,” Kabier screamed. Veejay came to help him just as Keya fainted in his arms.

# Chapter 35

“Oh my God! Kabier what happened to her?” Sheena cried out in panic, when she opened the door. Kabier entered the house with Keya, who was unconscious, in his arms. Following him silently were Sameer, Rishi and Veejay.

Everybody in the living room stood up as soon as they heard Sheena and saw Kabier walk in.

But without a word Kabier continued towards his bedroom. He carried Keya up the stairs, entered the room and placed her gently on his bed and covered her with the blanket.

“Is she going to be alright?” Raashi whispered. Sheena came and hugged her and the two of them stood silently staring at Keya. They were the only ones who had followed him up to his room.

“Her arm is injured; a bullet wound but she’ll be fine. The doctor has sedated her and so she’ll be out for a while,” Kabier said while rummaging through his cupboard. He pulled out a long sleeved shirt and handed it to Sheena.

“Why don’t you two make her comfortable? I’ll go down.” He walked out of his room leaving the two girls to undress Keya.

Kabier went down to the living room and saw many concerned eyes looking towards him, silently asking for answers. Janak was the first one to break the silence “Trisha...”

“Has been taken care of,” Kabier replied, interrupting his grandfather midway.

Janak shuddered. “God, poor Keya. I can’t even begin to imagine what she has gone through in these past hours. Thank God she is not too badly injured.”

“It’s over. It’s finally over.” Kabier closed his eyes, wanting to forget the terrible ordeal that they had gone through ever since they realized that Keya had been taken and then till he saw her alive and fine and could rescue her. “Thank God! She’s going to be okay and that’s what’s important.”

Turning to look at his mother he finally said, “Keya is in my room. She is going to stay with me from now on.”



Mina Sehgal started to say something when Kabier interrupted her, “Mom you don’t get it, do you? I love her and I am not letting her out of my sight for as long as I live. You will just have to accept that.”

Mina walked up to her son and hugged him and said, “I know. All I wanted to say was that, I am really happy that she is fine. And I don’t mind in the least if she is staying here with you.”

Kabier looked at his friend Veejay and said, “Thanks buddy. I never did say it earlier. But you really saved her for me. I am not sure what we would have done without you.”

“Come on Kabier. You know I’m there for you, any time, any place. You know that.” Veejay smiled.

“By the way when do I get to formally meet the lovely lady who has brought you down on your knees?” he asked jovially.

“Soon,” Kabier said, “very soon.”

Keya was dreaming and she knew it. Because only in a dream did you have that pin drop silence all around. She was walking through a dark tunnel, trying to find her way out and suddenly at the end of the tunnel, she could see a glimmer of light. She ran towards it and saw Kabier waiting for her, his arms open, a smile lighting his face. She wanted to run into his outstretched arms... But suddenly the dream changed and she was back to being twelve again and playing with Akash. Her father entered the house extremely angry. This was familiar to her, she had been here before, she thought subconsciously. Then as was usual in her dreams, she heard her parents screaming in the next room, at that moment her father came storming into her room, ready to attack the two children. In her dream she saw her mother come between her father and her. And then just as her father was about to strike, her mother’s form changed to Kabier and her father struck him instead and Kabier fell dead. Keya screamed.

Kabier woke up with a start. Keya was trembling and tossing on the bed, screaming his name, tears flowing from her eyes. He gathered her in his arms and tried to calm her down. But she kept saying, “No, not Kabier” again and again.

“Keya, sweetheart, I am here, I am fine.” But she wouldn’t calm down. He held her tightly in his arms and kissed her trembling lips, whispering sweet words to her.

Keya felt that familiar force again, shaking her out of her misery, making her forget, making her believe that everything was fine and that she

was dreaming. It was only a dream. She clung on to the force and didn't want to let it go. She could hear a voice now in her mind whispering soothing words to her. And then she dreamt that Kabier had his arms around her and was kissing her. This dream I like, she thought smiling to herself. She wound her arms around him and kissed him back, holding him tight, never wanting him to leave her. And then she opened her eyes and blinked.

This was real, Kabier was here in bed with her and he was kissing her.

Kabier watched Keya open her eyes and smile at him warmly. "Are you alright?"

"Well, kiss me once more and I'll be perfect," she told him with a mischievous grin.

He didn't need to be asked a second time. He lowered his mouth onto hers again and kissed her. He had almost lost her today and he needed to know she was alright. Reluctantly he drew back from the kiss and said, "You scared me right now; the way you kept screaming my name. I was so worried."

She gently touched his face with her hand. "I love you."

"I love you too, baby."

"Hey, where am I?" She tried to move out of his arms to see clearly through the dim light in the room, but he didn't let her budge an inch.

"You're in my home, in my bed, in my arms, where you belong."

"Oh God! Your mom, what must she be thinking?"

"Well, that I can't bear to have you away from me for even one second now."

"But..."

"No buts Keya, she knows how tortured I was ever since you were taken away. She understands."

Keya smiled and suddenly something dawned on her.

"It was you right, the last two times when I had a nightmare. You were there that night when I was sick and the other time after Janak was hospitalized, right? I thought you may have witnessed my nightmare then but when I tried to ask you subtly, you didn't say anything."

He smiled back at her.

"I knew it was different. Never ever had I felt so content and at ease after a nightmare like I have felt when you've been around."

"I'll always be around for you Keya, I promise," Kabier vowed.

“I know,” Keya said warmly.

“That night when you were unwell, I had just learnt the details of your past from grandfather and I had come to apologize. Raashi was so upset with me that she could have pushed me out of the door, but then you started screaming and I calmed you down so she kind of forgave me and told me about your nightmare. But I am surprised that you kept screaming my name, right now. I thought it was always about your parents and brother.”

“It is, but after the events of today, I dreamt that it was you who died trying to save Akash and me.” She shivered remembering their ordeal and hugged him tight. “It was horrible. I don’t ever want anything to happen to you.”

“Keya, nothing ever will happen to me. I can’t bear to have you away from me anymore. I don’t care what anyone says, we’re getting married tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to be away from you either; so for me, even tomorrow is too late,” Keya said smiling lovingly into his eyes.

# Epilogue

Keya looked at herself in the mirror, she was ready. She loved the red and gold flowing lehnga. Her hair was piled high on her head and a net dupatta in red and gold was placed right on top of her head to flow freely down her back and one shoulder. It was a gorgeous ensemble. She looked around to see Raashi, Sheena and Kabier's mom, fussing over the last minute details of their own outfits and smiled at them. This was the day of her wedding and though it was delayed by a week; as the two of them couldn't convince their family and friends to agree to the quick and simple wedding ceremony they wanted the very next day; she was happy. Today she would start her new life with the one person she loved the most in the world. She was truly and ecstatically happy.

Kabier's mom came up to her and kissed her cheek and said, "You look beautiful Keya! I am happy that Kabier chose you. I know I haven't apologized for misjudging you earlier, but I want you to start the first day of your life in my family knowing that I am truly sorry for what I said to you. And that I welcome you with my whole heart."

"Thank you, so much. This means a lot to me," Keya replied, smiling back at her.

"Go, be happy," Mina Sehgal said and walked out the door.

The next moment Akash entered and said, "Kabier is getting impatient Keya. If you're not out now, he's coming to get you himself."

"I am coming."

Raashi and Sheena laughed and walked out together.

Keya walked up to her brother and put her hand on his arm and walked with him down the aisle. All around were friends and family, watching her walk down to where Kabier was waiting, for her. Keya looked around at the beautiful lawns of the Sehgal Hotel where she had shared her first kiss with Kabier. It was so picturesque, with the setting sun and the distant sound of the sea waves gently splashing the shore.

She smiled at all the people she passed. At Sameer grinning wildly, Rithwik, who winked at her, Rishi who gave her a flying kiss, Veejay who she could never thank enough for saving her. And then finally she could see Kabier smiling at her, looking resplendent in his wedding attire of a long off

white flowing coat and matching off white trousers. He looked so handsome and he was all hers.

Half way down the aisle, Akash stopped and kissed both her cheeks and said, "I love you sis. No one deserves this more than you do."

In the next instant he motioned for Janak who was standing close by. Janak came forward and Akash placed Keya's hand into his and said, "You should be the one to hand her over to your grandson."

"Thank you. I am proud of you," Janak told him.

Thrilled, Janak walked her down the remaining distance and placed her hand into Kabier's.

Kabier placed his hands on both sides of her face and said, "You look beautiful and I love you so very much."

Keya put her hands on top of his and whispered, "I love you too."

Kabier smiled and said, "What are we waiting for? Let's get married and create some more magic."

Janak Sehgal watched the second of his angels getting married and smiled. That was two angels secure and happy. He looked at Raashi standing a distance away and said to himself quietly, "The last one and the toughest of the three." He turned to see his grandson Sameer staring admiringly at Raashi from a distance. Janak grinned, "Could it be possible..."

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Sapna Bhog grew up in Dubai at a time when there were hardly any channels to watch on TV but definitely a lot of books to read.

A Computer Engineer, she gave up her successful IT profession to look after her children and decided to give her creative side a chance and wrote her first romance novel, and never looked back.

Sapna loves to read, write, paint, shop and travel but not necessarily in that order. She lives in Pune, with her husband and 2 kids.



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A perfect one night stand is never supposed to mean more. But...

...it did for her!!

RAASHI DEWAN runs a successful chain of restaurants. She prided herself on being an ice maiden. Untouchable!!! Until she fell for Sameer Sehgal.

Hotel magnate, SAMEER SEHGAL, always gets what he wants. He has a dream and Raashi Dewan holds the key to its success. Unfortunately for him, he knows he has hurt her badly. But as he begins to work with her, he realises that maybe letting her go was the biggest mistake in his life. Especially when her life is threatened and they have no clue who to suspect.