

LET'S
START WITH
FOREVER



Sapna Bhog

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To
My Wonderful Kids

Believe in yourself and you will be Unstoppable!

Sometimes, two people have to fall apart to realize how much they need to
fall back together
- Unknown

Prologue

“Dance with me, Raashi,” whispered the silken voice just near her ear. The soft caress of his words sent a shiver through her. Closing her eyes, Raashi hastily tried in vain to suppress it. She knew whom that voice belonged to. His voice and his face had been invading her dreams for countless nights now. Slowly, she turned around.

Sameer had been watching her for a while now. They were in his hotel lawns at his cousin, Kabier’s wedding reception. The party was going on in full swing. The lawns were beautifully decorated and lit. All around there were a number of couples dancing to the romantic music that the band was belting out. She had been standing quietly in the shadows, in a corner of the lawns, observing the crowd and he couldn’t resist going up to her and teasing her senses by whispering softly to her in the darkness. Standing close to her, he saw her shiver and felt elated. He had been wooing her for the last few months and knew exactly how to bring about this desired reaction in her. He held his hand out to her as she turned, his eyes never leaving her beautiful face, waiting for her to put her hand in his.

To step into his arms and dance with him.

Raashi looked at the outstretched hand in front of her, trying not to look at his face. She knew the effect he had on her. She had been resisting him so hard since so long and now finally she was tired, tired of playing safe, of always wanting to do the right thing. Giving in to him would mean coming out of the safe cocoon she had built around herself. Today of all days she wanted to let loose and fly. Slowly, she looked up to his face, into eyes the color of dark, dark chocolate and was lost in his mesmerizing charm. She put her hand in his, letting him lead her on to the dance floor.

He held her lightly on the waist and she moved closer to him, putting her hands on his shoulders and let him lead them slowly to the music playing. This close, she could inhale the unforgettable fragrance that she always associated with him. The woody, musky fragrance of his cologne mixed with the unique scent that belonged to him. His scent invaded her senses, just as he had invaded her life. Sameer Sehgal had been spinning an irresistible web around her and she was getting caught in it.

“You’re unusually quiet today,” Sameer said.

“I am questioning my intelligence in agreeing to dance with you.”

He laughed, his typical throaty rumble and Raashi couldn't look away. He was one of the most gorgeous men she had ever met and she should be flattered that he was paying so much attention to her. In all honesty, she was thrilled. Her eyes could never stop following him when he was around. Tonight, he just looked splendid in the dark, well-fitted, three-piece suit that defined his well-toned body to perfection.

“Now you have me intrigued! So have you come up with an answer to that one yet?” He asked her.

“Well, considering your intentions towards me, I think that it definitely wasn't in my best interest to be dancing with you.”

“Beautiful, I always have your best interests at heart.”

“Yeah, right,” Raashi rolled her eyes and shook her head. They both knew what he wanted from her. He had ensured that she knew exactly what that was.

“I never lie. You will have the best time of your life with me.” He told her softly and surely, his eyes never leaving hers.

Sameer watched her digest the obvious implication in his words. He had wanted her for so long and seeing her look so beautiful in the deep cut amber gown that showed off her perfect curves, was driving him crazy. He whirled her around the dance floor and before she knew it, they were dancing in a secluded alcove, surrounded by palms, away from the dance floor, away from any possible prying eyes.

He moved her closer to him. Raashi sighed and put both her arms around his neck and rested her head gently on his shoulder. She really shouldn't be doing this, she thought. But right now it felt great to be held by Sameer even though she knew she was heading towards trouble.

He had pursued her relentlessly the last few months. He had made use of every opportunity presented to him to tease her, to challenge her and to be with her. Their lives recently had been so intertwined with the same set of people they cared for, that they had met ever so often.

She recalled a conversation she had had with him a few months ago when he had openly made his intentions clear to her.

“I want you, Raashi, in my bed and I will have you there pretty soon,” he

had told her confidently.

Raashi had been stunned. Finally, she had replied saying, “I don’t do one-night stands and from what I have heard of you, that’s what you usually do. So, go find someone else. I am not interested.”

In response to that he had curved his lips into a wicked smile.

“You are interested. I know it. When I touch you, you go up in flames.”

He brought his face close to hers, so close that there wasn’t an inch of space between them. So close that her heart had pounded, but she had stood still, refusing to let him know that she craved his touch. And then he had rubbed his cheek against hers. Slowly, softly, letting her feel the scratch of his perpetual five o’ clock shadow on her skin. Helplessly, she had shut her eyes and trembled. He had lit a fire within her and he was aware of it.

Satisfied, he tilted her chin slightly upwards and she opened her eyes to see him smiling cheekily at her.

Gathering her courage she had taken a step back from him.

“Stay away from me, Sameer. This was nothing. I am not your usual type of woman. So leave me alone.” Saying that she had walked off.

But he hadn’t left her alone. In fact, he had chased her even more persistently. He would touch her; the slightest of caresses that would make her burn for more or whisper softly in her ear like earlier that would drive her mad. She wanted him and the worse thing was that he knew it.

Now, dancing with him, his strong arms encircling her, was slowly melting away her resistance.

As the music changed and another song played, Sameer drew her even closer to him, so close that she was almost crushed against his chest. He was surprised that she wasn’t resisting him today like she normally did. She was so soft against him and he had wanted her for so long.

“Raashi,” he said softly.

“Hmm,” she replied, her head still resting on his shoulder.

“You look lovely tonight. Simply stunning!”

She looked up at him. “Thank you. You’re not doing too bad yourself.”

Sameer smiled at her off-hand comment.

“Raashi...we need to talk about this. This, whatever is happening between

us. You cannot run from it and you know that.”

“Sameer...No,” she began shaking her head, but he silenced her by putting his finger on her lips.

“We have played cat and mouse with each other for far too long, don’t you think? Aren’t you curious to know how it could be between us?”

Raashi stepped back from him, struck by his question.

“No...” she began again but again he cut her off.

“Kiss me. One kiss. I promise I will stop if you don’t want anything more.”

She looked up at him, unsure of herself, of what to do, wanting to refuse, knowing that it would be a mistake to do as he suggested. But she also knew she would regret not giving into him.

“Come on, Raashi! I know you’re tempted. I know that...”

She didn’t let him finish. Raashi rose on tiptoes, angled her head and kissed him smack on his lips. She teased her mouth gently against his. It took him all of a second to recover from the shock that she was actually giving him what he wanted and he kissed her back. He put his arms around her and brought her closer to him. He took charge of the kiss, and she let him. She gave him what he wanted; let him have his way with her lips and mouth.

She responded to him like the siren she was to him, giving herself completely into this maddening kiss. He pressed her mouth open and entered her soft, wet mouth with his tongue. God! She tasted divine. She was warm and sweet. Her tongue melded with his and it drove him mad. Raashi put her arms around his neck and kissed him so sweetly that he wanted to pick her up and have his way with her right here, right now. He had to get control over himself.

Raashi felt her world was spinning out of control. Like a forest fire, the flames were spreading through each and every part of her body and slowly every inch of her was aflame. She pressed herself closer to him, wanting to increase the contact with his body. She desired him like no man ever before and there had been none before him to awaken this response in her. This was crazy. No, she was crazy to be doing this. But it felt so right to be in his arms that she wondered why she had been resisting him all along. She opened her mouth wider, giving him all the access he needed, reveling when he kissed

her hungrily, his normally tightly reined control so obviously slipping.

He had to get her out of here. He pulled back his lips suddenly from hers. His heart thundering, he said, "I want you, Raashi. Right now. Right this moment. Come with me."

She looked at him stunned for a second. Feeling reckless and more carefree than she had ever felt in her life, she looked straight into his eyes and nodded her acceptance and said very softly, "Sameer, be there for me in the morning when I wake up, please."

Jubilant, he kissed her lips passionately, just once, before holding her hand and pulling her along with him.

Chapter 1

3 months later

Raashi Deewan looked around her restaurant in awe. She felt like that each and every time she was here. It was her dream and she had fulfilled it. AquaNox was solely her baby. She had planned and designed it from scratch. Compliments were pouring in and the reviews were fantastic. It was booked fully for the next three weeks and there was a long waiting list of diners counting on last minute cancellations. She sighed softly with a gentle smile on her face. It had been tough and challenging but things were finally looking good.

She missed her parents though and her grandmother. They would have been proud of what she had been able to achieve. She gazed up for a second, assured they were smiling at her from the stars. It had been an uphill task taking over their fledgling restaurant business after her grandmother's death. But she was succeeding, finally.

She went to the hostess desk at the entrance and scanned through the guest list for the rest of the evening. As her eyes ran through the long list of names, pausing over some that she recognized, her heart almost skipped a beat when she read his name. She scanned the rest of the list and her eyes were drawn back to the name that had caught her attention earlier.

As she stood there, her eyes glued to the name on the list, she heard his silken voice say, "I have a reservation? A table for two?"

"Under what name, sir?" She heard the hostess ask.

"Sameer Sehgal," he replied.

This couldn't be happening. She had avoided him for so long and now fate again had caught her off balance and thrown him straight in her path, when she least expected it. She wasn't prepared for this chance encounter. To be honest, she would never be prepared.

Raashi slowly looked at him. He hadn't seen her. He was scanning the décor. Raashi couldn't help but notice the bored look on his face. A look of someone used to dining at exclusive places.

She took her time assessing him, her eyes taking all of him in; after all, she hadn't seen him in three months. He was so tall that even in her high

heels she had to tilt her head up to look at him. With a golden complexion, high cheekbones, a straight patrician nose and eyes the color of dark chocolate, he was any woman's fantasy man. His dark hair was stylishly cut, though it was longer than usual. It had a ruffled look, like some woman had just lovingly run her hands through it. His face, as always, hinted of the perpetual five o'clock shadow, like he couldn't get a clean shave no matter how hard he tried. He was a disturbingly attractive man and what set him apart was his killer smile. He had that slight cleft in his chin that became more pronounced as he smiled. Always the charmer, she saw how he bestowed that smile on her hostess. The poor girl fumbled and stammered in reply to him.

He was dressed flawlessly, as usual in a dark formal business suit, white shirt and patterned tie that showcased his perfectly well toned body. She knew first-hand how perfectly well defined his chest was, his narrow waist tapering into flat abs. She had traced those carved abs with her hands and mouth. Her breathing hitched and she put a deliberate freeze on her mind. She remembered every detail of that body. It annoyed her that it had taken just one look for everything about him to come crashing back.

A woman's voice interrupted her assessment, "What's taking you so long?"

Before she could turn to see who had spoken, she saw him turn to face her and try as she might, she couldn't move her gaze away from him.

Sameer Sehgal turned his face and stilled.

Their eyes met and recognition hit him like a blow to his gut. Sameer couldn't believe that the woman staring so calmly and confidently at him was Raashi. He had always thought about this, imagined what their encounter would be like after...

Shaking his head, he refused to let his mind take that direction right now. He was out on a very important date, one that could decide his future and he didn't want to get distracted. She, on her end, didn't bother to acknowledge him but continued to openly stare at him.

He ventured to break the awkwardness between them but stopped when he saw the cold look she gave him. Her outward calm was betrayed by the fury he saw in her eyes. He continued to stare at her and she returned the look icily.

“I thought you had booked us a private corner,” Raashi heard the woman with Sameer say.

She turned to look at her and her eyes widened a fraction when she realized that the woman with Sameer was Natasha Arya, a popular socialite and heiress. Natasha frequently graced the pages of several society magazines. But looking at her, Raashi realized that the magazines didn’t do her justice. She was even more stunning in reality. She looked exotic with glowing skin, dark eyes and a small nose. Her poker straight hair was stylishly cut short to frame her face. She was dressed in a short black, strappy dress and had an air about her that clearly showed that she knew her place in the upper echelons of society. She was tall, almost as tall as Sameer in her high heels and together they looked fantastic.

She had heard the rumors about them. There was talk that Natasha may become a permanent fixture in Sameer’s life. She hadn’t seen him or spoken to him in three months, but they still had a lot of common friends and she had heard through them that he was seriously considering marrying Natasha. She also knew that Natasha was the only woman he had seriously been involved with, once upon a time and now they were back together. Despite all this, Raashi was unable to stop the small shard of jealousy that ran through her heart.

Sameer saw Raashi look at Natasha. He could almost hear her thoughts as she made the obvious connection. There were so many things that he wanted to say to Raashi, but now was not the right time. Will there ever be a right time? There never had been and there never would be, he told himself.

From the back recesses of his mind, he heard Natasha say his name.

When he didn’t reply, she shook him slightly, “Sameer?” she said again. It took a moment for him to gather his senses. He turned his attention back to the hostess and asked, “What’s going on?”

Apparently, there was some mix up and the table reserved for them was in the indoor section and not in the outdoor area like Natasha wanted.

Raashi silently watched Natasha giving her head hostess a hard time. She quickly scanned the list again and said to the hostess, “You can give them that one, with the sea view.”

Raashi indicated with a nod of her head. The hostess replied, “But, Raashi, that one is booked for...”

“It’s okay, I’ll handle it,” Raashi responded, understanding what the girl was telling her.

“Well, you better. Obviously, you people have made a mistake and you ought to rectify it immediately. Lucky for you that you found a place for us or else it would not have gone well on your record if we had to leave unhappy,” Natasha remarked coldly.

Sameer saw Raashi digest the cold tone in which she was spoken to. He saw her forehead crease and her mouth open to reply to Natasha’s comment.

But then she changed her mind. Her face cleared and Sameer heard her speak very calmly, “My apologies, we’ll ensure that this won’t happen again. Enjoy your meal.”

And without a second glance at him, she moved away, leaving the hostess to guide them to their table.

The place was excellent, Sameer thought. Being an owner of several world-class hotels, he had an eye for detail and décor and this place was fantastic. He loved the way the owner had converted this old sea-facing villa into a quaint restaurant. Soft lights were drifting everywhere and the music outside was just right for an evening out for dinner. The indoor area was separated from the outdoor by glass enclosures. Each time the glass doors to the inside opened, he could hear some of the louder music that was being played. He had heard that the indoor section of the place was a lounge and allowed people to enjoy the latest music along with their food.

He was surprised that Raashi had allowed them this table, considering he knew what she must feel about him. And this table obviously was one of the best in the restaurant. It was in a secluded corner shadowed by tall potted plants.

He hadn’t seen her for so long and now knowing that she was around, close by, made him wish they had a table where he could see her properly. She obviously worked here, may be a manager, though come to think of it, he had never known what it was that she exactly did. In all the months he had taken to win her over, he had been so caught up with wooing her that he hadn’t bothered to really get to know her. They had never got to the point of discussing their lives and he had never asked her in detail what she did for a living. She had mentioned that she was in the restaurant business but he hadn’t given it much thought then.

Well, now he knew where she worked. This was a newly opened place so she must have recently joined.

“Sameer, what is wrong with you today?” Natasha asked him. “You haven’t been paying me the slightest attention.”

“Oh, Sorry! I am just a bit preoccupied, that’s all,” Sameer shook his head apologetically. He had to stop thinking about Raashi and pay attention to Natasha. After all he had brought her here to bridge their differences and start afresh with the intention to get to know her once again.

Sameer had dated Natasha several years back when he was studying in London. He had bumped into her at a common friend’s party and her good looks and sharp confidence had blown him away. He remembered falling fast and hard for her. But to give himself credit, he had been very young then and had thought himself to be seriously in love with her. However, when he had wanted to take the relationship to the next level, she had balked at the idea of settling down. She had wanted to enjoy life, which in her case had meant traveling and dating other men. She didn’t want to be tied down by any lasting commitments. Her ideas were at odds with his and he had called off their relationship, much to her protest.

It hadn’t mattered to him that she had let everyone believe that she had broken up with him. But after her, he had never let any woman get close to him ever, never let any woman under his skin, until he had met Raashi. However, whatever they had was over even before it had started. He had wanted it to be that way. He had ensured that Raashi was a closed chapter in his life.

It was important now to think of the future and in all probability it seemed that Natasha might be a part of it. Her father, Jiten Arya, was the owner of the Arya group of Hotels. Only recently, he had come to Sameer with the proposition to take over all the Arya hotels. On further inquisition, Sameer had found out that although the group was doing well, it needed a lot of restructuring and changes that Jiten Arya was not keen to take on. In his words, he was growing old and didn’t want the added responsibility of the hotels anymore. Hence, he was offering them to Sameer, who he was sure was more than capable of doing what was necessary.

Taking over the Arya chain of hotels would be quite beneficial for his own hotel group as the Aryas had converted several old palaces across India into resort hotels. The acquisition of these hotels under his already successful

chain would make his group the biggest in South East Asia. But the only hitch was that Jiten Arya wanted Sameer to marry his daughter before the Sehgal group took over them. Jiten Arya was shrewd and calculating and Sameer figured that offering his daughter to him on a platter also entailed that she got a direct connection to one of the top business families in the country, which was something Natasha would be proud to flaunt. The idea should have been enchanting, since Natasha was the only woman who had ever held his heart, but somehow this time around, his heart wasn't in it. Of course, he wanted the Arya Hotels added to his own, that's why he was giving the idea some thought. Nonetheless, the notion of marrying Natasha now didn't seem to have the same impact on him as it had before.

In recent years, he had never thought of marriage in serious terms. He unquestionably didn't want to fall in love and then marry, he didn't believe in that anymore. But seeing his cousin Kabier and Kabier's sister Sheena both get married recently and that too after falling in love, made him see how cynical he really had become. He was happy for them, he truly was, but he knew that he would never allow himself to fall for a woman ever again. He had done that once and had been sorely disappointed and hurt. He wasn't going down that road again and hence Jiten Arya's proposition was sounding more and more appealing.

Sameer knew Natasha quite well. They had a history together. Even though they had broken off years ago, they had been in touch intermittently, bumping into each other at some or the other social event. Her father had gotten them connected once again and no matter what the social rags said, he really wasn't dating her. They had met once or twice and that was it.

The whole equation was quite complicated. He had to make up his mind once and for all whether he wanted to marry her or not. Eyeing her now, he realized that she was as beautiful as always. She had a great body that she flaunted very well in her strappy dress that fit her perfectly. Her short hair was expertly cut and styled and that gave her a very western and modern appearance. He sighed as he realized that inspite of her gorgeous looks, he wasn't attracted to her. The young boy who had once been so besotted by her was no longer there. She didn't make his blood sing, and in all honesty he couldn't recollect if she had ever had that effect on him.

Sameer was annoyed with himself. What was wrong with him? He was out with a gorgeous woman on a date and instead of trying to rekindle the

chemistry they had once shared, he had already reached the conclusion that there was nothing between them. He was crazy. That was just it. Seeing Raashi had thrown him off balance.

Tuning back to the conversation with Natasha, he slowly sipped his wine, listening to her talk. He tried adding some intelligent remarks here and there, willing his mind not to get distracted again.

He signaled a waiter to refill their drinks. While the waiter was pouring the wine in Natasha's glass, she moved her hand suddenly to make a point and by mistake it knocked the wine bottle. A little bit of wine spilled on the table cloth and also on her dress. Natasha shrieked and stood up.

"What is the matter with you people? Aren't you trained properly or do they hire you straight off the streets? Can't you see what you're doing?" She pointed towards her dress, "You've ruined my expensive dress."

She was creating quite a commotion and it really wasn't the poor guy's fault. Sameer tried to intervene, "Natasha, it's okay. Just calm down."

But she was in no mood to listen, she continued to rant and rave at the poor waiter, who stood frozen at the spot, looking around helplessly.

Hearing the commotion from Sameer's table, Raashi quickly made her way to it. The other patrons of the restaurant were staring at the table, everyone obviously curious about the cause of the fuss.

"What is the problem here?" Sameer heard Raashi ask the waiter in a quiet voice.

The waiter relieved to see her, started to immediately explain the situation. In a sweeping glance at the table, Raashi quickly understood what had happened and asked the guy to leave.

Natasha, in no mood to cooperate, launched into a tirade against Raashi. Raashi stood there, her arms folded, letting Natasha have her say.

Feeling embarrassed, Sameer said in a firm voice, "Natasha, it wasn't really his fault. So let's not make a big deal out of it. Okay? Calm down. "

Turning to Raashi, he said, "I am sorry. Can we get our dinner now?"

Ignoring him totally, she nodded to a waiter waiting next to her to serve them their food. She hung around, keeping a watchful eye while their food was served, just to ensure there was no repeat of any accident.

Raashi could feel a headache coming on. Seeing Sameer had upset her and

then his spoilt date had made a fuss and created a scene, which wasn't good for her business. She stood there silently, waiting until the waiter finished his job.

Sameer watched her overseeing their meal and let his eyes roam over her. She really was quite lovely. She had a subtle grace that had always made him want to look at her and keep looking, like he was now. He took in her face, the high forehead with delicately arched eyebrows, long curling eyelashes sheltering those beautiful hazel eyes that seemed to change color from brown to green depending on her mood. A black liner boldly outlined her doe shaped eyes. Her lush lips were painted only with the slightest of color. On anyone else it should have made them look less appealing, but on Raashi it looked gorgeous. It went perfectly with her flawlessly warm complexion that he knew was exactly the same from her forehead to her toes and all the way in between.

Her dark straight hair fell down to her lower back. And she had clipped a few strands on the top of her head, leaving the rest of it loose and free flowing from behind. He remembered their silken heaviness flowing in his hands.

She was dressed formally in a dark green shirt-dress, belted at her waist with a slim gold chain belt that showed off the narrowness of her waist and the long length of her legs. His gaze lingered at her exposed legs for a moment longer than it should have. He looked back up into her eyes and found her watching him with a knowing look. She knew he was watching her, appraising her. He didn't look away; he couldn't escape the stormy gaze that was fixed on him. He had always been able to read her face very well, read her eyes that spoke her thoughts aloud for anyone who had the ability to read them and read them he could. He knew she was really angry and desperately wanted him to leave. He saw her narrow her gaze at him, and compress her lips. But the very next second, she turned her eyes away from him and dismissed him coldly.

In that brief moment, he felt his irritation rise. She was casually dismissing him, refusing to acknowledge him in any way.

Sameer felt his normally dormant temper grow. All these months had done nothing to diminish the effect she had on him, even though he had deliberately stayed away from her. He hated all these feelings she had aroused in him. She hadn't spoken a word to him when he had apologized for

Natasha's behavior. He had no way of knowing if she still felt the same attraction that she had felt for him all those months back, the same attraction he felt rising within him once again. Would she still melt if he whispered into her ear or if he touched her? He suddenly felt an urge to get some reaction out of her.

He saw the waiter come forward to help with the second serving. He abruptly stopped him.

"Not you, I want her to do it," he said, pointing to Raashi.

Raashi stared at him aghast, her eyes burning with fury. What did he think he was doing?

"But, Sir..." the waiter said.

"I said, not you. Her," Sameer repeated firmly. The waiter looked from him to Raashi, the bowl of pasta in his hands.

Quietly Raashi walked towards him and took the bowl out of the stunned waiter's hands.

Sameer saw her expertly scoop the steaming pasta out of the bowl and into his plate, once and then twice. The third time she went to do it, he held her wrist to stop her.

Raashi felt like she had been jolted with a high voltage electric current. Her eyes moved to Sameer's and saw the same dazed reaction mirrored there. His thumb delicately, deliberately caressed the inside of her wrist, making her hand tremble. He stared into her stormy eyes and smiled at her, arrogantly.

Sameer felt a thrill knowing he could get this reaction from her, after all. So, no matter how calm and collected she appeared, he knew exactly how she felt in his presence.

Reeling in anger at his audacity and his obvious arrogance, Raashi tipped the pasta bowl slightly and the remaining contents of the bowl went down on Sameer's lap, all over the napkin and on his trousers. The smug smile vanished from his face and he gave a pained expression, releasing her hand as the impact of the steaming hot food seeped through his clothes and burnt his skin.

Natasha stood up, appalled. "I can't believe she did that. It was deliberate. I saw it. I need to talk to someone in charge," she yelled.

Raashi saw Sameer glowering at her while trying to clear the mess of his

clothes. Turning to Natasha, she said calmly, "You can talk to me, I am in charge."

"Well, of all the... I am so going to get you fired. You incompetent idiot! I am going to get this place shut down, you just wait and watch."

Raashi held her hand up, stopping Natasha with a glacial look.

"Enough!" Raashi said. "You have caused enough trouble already tonight. So why don't you two just do us all a favor and leave."

"You can't throw us out. This was your fault. You don't know who I am and what I can do. You won't get a job anywhere in this city, once I am done with you," Natasha said haughtily.

Raashi's eyes flared in response. She had had enough of this woman.

"To begin with, you have created enough nuisance. Secondly, you are welcome to try your hand at all the threats that you've heaped my way, but I assure you that you won't be able to touch me with a pole, let alone get me fired or get my restaurant shut. So save your empty threats for someone else."

She threw Sameer a disgusted look and told him, "I am sure you'll pay your bill when you leave, Mr. Sehgal." She signaled for the waiter to get them their bill and walked away, her head held high.

The evening was a total loss, Sameer thought as he drove Natasha back home. She had insisted on going to some other place to eat, but he hadn't been interested in the least. It had been a disaster at the restaurant and to top it all, his clothes were terribly messed up. He was still riling over how Raashi had treated him. She had thoroughly embarrassed him. But he had to accept he had deserved it. He had goaded her to serve him the food to provoke her into reacting and then he just didn't know what had come over him. He remembered how he had held her wrist and caressed it. He still wanted her, he realized. This was not a good sign. He had avoided her like the plague for so long. And if she was angry with him earlier, then after tonight she'd probably never look at him again.

Natasha broke his reverie, "Why in the world did you not say something? You let that girl throw us out of the restaurant. How dare she?"

"Well, I guess we gave her ample opportunity to do that. You were creating an uproar back there," Sameer replied honestly.

"Me? She dropped the pasta on your lap? Why did you ask her to serve

you in the first place?”

Thankfully, without waiting for his reply, she continued, “I am not going to let her get away with insulting us like this. I will find out who she is and get her fired.”

“Raashi Deewan,” Sameer said. “And she’s right, you can’t do a damn thing to her,” he told her point blank.

“What do you mean?” she queried.

“She is very close to Janak Sehgal, my grandfather. In fact, she’s one of his angels.”

“I don’t understand.”

Sameer let out an exasperated breath and started to explain.

“You know my cousin Kabier, right?” Sameer asked.

“Yeah, he got married a few months back, didn’t he?”

“Kabier’s wife, Keya, Kabier’s younger sister, Sheena and Raashi are best friends and they are very close to my grandfather. They are his angels or Janak’s angels as he calls them. So you see, as long as she has my grandfather protecting her, no one can do a thing to her. I suggest you drop the idea or it will leave you embarrassed.”

“My God! You knew her all along.”

“Hmm,” he said in response.

“And yet you didn’t acknowledge each other. In fact, she was quite hostile towards us. Makes me wonder why.”

A few seconds passed and Sameer realized that Natasha was watching him pointedly, waiting for a response.

“Let’s just say we don’t see eye to eye anymore,” he told her with finality, closing the subject.

Chapter 2

Raashi stayed on longer than usual at the restaurant. She didn't want to be alone. Being alone meant that she'd have time to think of him. She had thought that she was over him, over the effect he had on her when he was around. One touch was all it took and she was back to being a sucker for his practiced charm.

The restaurant was closed for the night and she had no option but to head home. She got into her car, a brand new Black Honda Civic and drove back. She had only recently gifted herself this car. It was on her best friend, Sheena's insistence that she had bought the car, a self-assurance booster after the disastrous damage that her self-confidence had borne following that fateful night with Sameer.

Resignedly, she entered her house, a comfortable apartment that she and her sister, Jiya, had inherited after their grandmother's death. But Jiya was away in New York, studying, and Raashi was on her own. She missed her sister. But more than anything else she missed her best friends, Sheena and Keya.

They were her pillars of support, her advisors, her critics, her everything. The three of them came from three totally different backgrounds. It had never mattered that Sheena came from a very affluent family or that Keya was an orphan or that Raashi was from a middle class background because what they had together was beyond special. They were her dearest friends and she was theirs.

She dropped her keys on her nightstand and sat down on her bed. Tonight of all nights she really needed them. It used to be so different back when both Sheena and Keya had been unmarried. She could pick up the phone and call either of them or just drop by their houses whenever she felt like it. Now, with them busy in their married lives, neither was right to do, so late at night.

Facing Sameer Sehgal tonight had been so difficult for her. She sighed and lay down on the bed. No matter how hard she had tried to erase their night together from her memory, she couldn't. She had experienced heaven with him that night and then he had just left. That one night was the biggest mistake of her life.

Sameer Sehgal! She said the name out aloud to herself. The Golden Boy

of the Indian Real Estate and Hotel industry, Director, Sehgal Corporation, Managing Director of the Sehgal Real Estate & Hotels group. His work titles were impressive. His residential projects were some of the most exclusive and sought after in the country. He had bought and turned around some of the oldest hotels in India into massive money making ventures. Where he went, success followed. Like King Midas, what he touched, did turn to gold.

Well, some part of his success had to be attributed to his family. He was after all Janak's grandson. He had been genetically gifted with the finest business acumen and had learnt from the best. Janak Sehgal was one of the most successful businessmen in the country today and he had ensured that his grandsons had attended the best schools first in the country and then in England. Only last year, with retirement on his mind, had he distributed the reins of his huge business to his grandsons, the hotels and real estate to Sameer, the automobiles to Sameer's younger brother, Rishi and the telecom and software to Kabier, his eldest grandson and now the head of the Sehgal business empire. Janak himself handled only the media business now. Janak's own son, Jai Sehgal, Sameer's father, headed the legal side of their business.

But more than anything else, Janak Sehgal was the dearest old man in the whole world. She loved him like her own grandfather and he loved her in return. She was one of his angels. She, Sheena and Keya - he called them 'Janak's angels'. They were as close to him as they were to each other. He had been there for her as long as she could remember.

She was thirteen when her parents had died in a fatal car accident. Her grandmother was trying to run the restaurant they owned after her son and daughter-in-law had passed away. She had enrolled her and Jiya, her younger sister, in a prestigious boarding school in Dehradun. Raashi had met Keya and Sheena in the school and they had become best friends over a period of time. Through Sheena, she had met Janak and he had made a place for himself in her life and in her heart, always being there for her, listening to her, helping her. He was her friend and her mentor. She went to him for advice, almost always. The only instance she hadn't gone to him was when she had the fiasco with Sameer. She couldn't bring herself to confide with him on that matter.

She shut her eyes and recalled the first time she had met Sameer. It was six months back, but she could recollect the incident as clearly as if it had happened yesterday. She had gone to fetch Sheena from her house. Sheena

was getting late and instead of waiting up with her, Raashi had decided to get the car started and ready to leave as soon as Sheena showed up. She was reversing her car from Sheena's driveway when a monstrous four-wheel drive had zipped right behind her, causing her to brake suddenly. Her heart beating and head buzzing from narrowly missing an accident, she had got out of the car to see who was driving so rashly. She had seen him and called out to him.

The driver had left his car in the driveway and was walking coolly towards the house, completely unaware of what he had done.

"Hey, I am talking to you," she had yelled.

He had turned around and then stood where he was, silently staring at her.

"Who the hell do you think you are? You almost cost me my back fender, not to mention the fact that I could have been badly injured," she had screamed at him.

"Well, you could use more common sense while reversing," he had replied back, calmly folding his arms together.

His response had really made her mad. Instead of regretting his own hasty and careless entrance, he had gone on to blame her.

"Hey, you were the one driving too damn fast, that too in a private driveway. I could have been seriously crushed under that monster you have there." She had been in no mood to back down.

He had raised an eyebrow. "But nothing happened, so what is the fuss all about then?" he had asked, shrugging his shoulders.

"That is such an irresponsible thing to say."

"Lady, what is your problem? I can drive on this driveway blindfolded if I had to. I know it like the back of my hand. You were never in any danger." He had said dryly.

"I could definitely question your driving skills. In any case, this conversation is leading nowhere. So, I'd rather not waste my breath on you any longer."

Raashi had seen him staring at her incredulously. He had been clearly outraged by her last statement. What did she care anyway? She didn't even know who he was. She had started to turn around, when she heard Sheena's voice.

“Sameer, Hi,” Sheena had said excitedly. “It’s so good to see you again. I am so glad that you’re back and for good.” Sheena had given him a tight hug and said, “Kabier is waiting inside for you.”

Raashi hadn’t recognized him. This was Sameer Sehgal, Sheena’s cousin. She had never met him before, though she had seen pictures of him and heard a lot about him through Sheena. He had recently returned from London to take over the family real estate and hotel business. He had been operating primarily out of London, establishing a strong foothold in the European markets, but in the last few years he had slowly started taking over the Indian side of the business also. Sheena had mentioned that he had returned to set up his base in India permanently now.

Sheena had held onto his arm and spoke again, “Sameer, you met Keya last night. Well, this is my other best friend, Raashi.” Looking at Raashi, she had continued, “And Raashi, this is my cousin, Sameer.”

Raashi remembered how she had looked at him again. She had been so angry earlier that she hadn’t given his appearance a second glance. He was tall, really tall and she had to admit, Sheena’s cousin was extremely good looking and his clothes, though casual, screamed exclusive designer chic. She had looked back into his eyes again and realized he was smiling at her open appraisal of him.

“Hi,” she had greeted him coolly.

“Hello, Raashi! I guess an apology is due to you.”

She had frowned at him and Sheena had also looked up at him questioningly.

He had turned to Sheena, “I almost crashed into Raashi’s car as she was reversing.”

Raashi had been quite surprised by the apology, but hadn’t made much out of it then. Shrugging her shoulders, she had left with Sheena almost immediately and hadn’t thought of him again.

Raashi turned to her side and thought how all those months ago their lives had suddenly become so entangled.

She had met him at a club a few weeks after their first meeting. She was out partying with Keya and some of their close friends, Rithwik and Aditya, when she had stepped off the dance floor and felt someone watching her

keenly. She had turned around and found herself looking straight into Sameer's eyes. He was with Sheena's elder brother, Kabier. He had waved at her and she responded back. She had gone with Keya to meet them. Kabier, like Sameer, had also only recently returned to the country and had taken over the telecommunications and software arm of the Sehgal business and was Keya's boss, then. They had spoken very briefly to the two men. And for the rest of the night, every time she looked at him, she noticed Sameer watching her. It had made her slightly uncomfortable, but, well, she had to admit she couldn't get her eyes off him either. He was divine to look at and she grudgingly confessed to herself that she found him attractive. But why of all the beautiful women she had heard he dated, would he be even mildly interested in her? Probably curiosity, she had concluded and brushed it all off.

Back in those days she had never made anything of the first few meetings with him. They were as casual as she supposed they ought to be. He was Sheena's cousin and she was Sheena's best friend. That was the only connection she had with him.

It was the third time that they had met, that changed the equation between them. They were on board Rajiv's yacht, a few weeks before Sheena and Rajiv got married. It was a weekend party and though Sameer had come with a date, he hadn't paid much attention to her. He had been more attentive to Raashi the whole time, talking to her, dancing with her. And she had enjoyed the attention, realizing she liked being with him. He was funny, smart and oh, so charming!

It was late in the night when they all started playing a game that was the Tequila version of 'Spin the Bottle', you either drank a shot of Tequila or dared to accept a challenge. The rules were simple yet naughty. If you chose to drink, you had to rub salt on a part of your challenger's body and lick the salt from that very spot, before downing the tequila. Towards the end of the game, she was paired with Sameer and he had chosen to drink a shot. He had stood observing her silently from top to toe and she had felt herself go warm everywhere. He had taken a turn around her and then another one and stopped right behind her. Then before she knew it, he had gently moved her hair to one side and rubbed salt on the side of her neck, just above her bare shoulder. Stunned, she had turned sideways in his direction to tell him, "No!"

And he had said, "The rules state that I choose which part of your body I

get to lick the salt from and I choose this.” And then he had bent his head and sucked the salt off her neck.

Raashi still remembered the volatile impact of his lips and tongue on her neck. She still recalled, how he had continued to suck on her neck, a few seconds longer than needed. She had shuddered and she knew he had felt it. He knew because he had lifted his head, given her a mischievous wink and then gulped down his shot.

That was the very first time she had felt her heart beat at double the pace. That was when she realized that she was crazily attracted to him. That was the first night she had dreamt of him.

The next morning, she had been standing on the deck of the yacht, near the railing, observing the sea waves splashing gently, when Sameer had approached her and made his intentions clear. He had acknowledged that he was attracted to her and had arrogantly told her that he was going to have her in his arms and his bed, very soon. She had laughed out loud at his declaration and had brushed him away. She had continued to stay away from him as much as she could. She had had no desire to sleep with him and be one of his many conquests. She was not into casual relationships, especially because she was no expert on men. She had only ever exchanged a few not so memorable kisses with some of her very few boyfriends and she was sure, in fact, certain, that if she did let Sameer in her life, it would be volatile. He would sweep her away and she would lose herself and her heart in the process.

But, fate was such that she crossed paths with him more often than she wanted to. First, Sheena got married in Goa and then Keya married Sheena’s elder brother, Kabier in a whirlwind marriage.

All throughout, Sameer persistently pursued her. He was always near her, closer than her own shadow. At times he would whisper something in her ear when she least expected him to be near or touch her arm or caress her cheek or neck, whenever he could. And at other occasions he would behave like a friend, talking mundane things with her. Though initially wary of him and his self-proclaimed intentions, she had started accepting him around her. He had slowly and steadily softened her heart and there was nothing that she could have done to prevent it. On the contrary, she had enjoyed his attention.

Finally, on the night of Keya and Kabier’s reception, she had given in to him. On looking back at that encounter with him, which she had done so

many times in the last few months, she always cursed herself for being so vulnerable and having allowed him to seduce her.

She had been especially defenseless that night. She was already feeling low as both her best friends were married and had their own lives. And though she was genuinely happy for Keya and Sheena, she wasn't sure that she herself could ever be as lucky as them. She had been busy with her depressing thoughts when Sameer had come and whisked her off, first to dance with him and then later to his bed.

That moment just before she had kissed him, she had looked into his face and thought that perhaps she could also find her own happiness, like her friends, with him. The past months that she had spent with him had crossed her mind in a flash and she had realized that she had fallen for him. And so her heart glowing with happiness, she had taken his hand and let him take her to that hotel room.

But, her happiness was not long lived. What had been a magical night for her had been nothing but a one-night stand for him. She had woken up and had been horrified to find herself all alone in a hotel room with Sameer nowhere in sight.

She had waited for him, before admitting to herself that he had walked out on her without a word. Finally, she had left the hotel disillusioned and hurt. Still, some part of her had hoped that he would call her. But he never did. She was not stupid; she had understood the situation for what it was. She had become just another one of Sameer Sehgal's conquests. He had destroyed her self-esteem thoroughly and surely. So, keeping her own pride intact, she had never called him and had astutely avoided any public occasion where he would be present.

Try as hard as she could, Raashi couldn't help remembering the despair she had felt at his rejection, the complete lack of self-confidence at being treated so callously. She had given into him that night believing in all earnestness that he liked her and cared about her. That it was not a game for him and that they could actually build a relationship together. But, of course, he hadn't felt the same.

Had she truly meant nothing to him? Had the night not been as magical for him as it had been for her? Had she dreamt the way he had made her feel? Was it her inexperience that had put him off? Why had he not called? Why had he so thoroughly rejected her? She had so many questions and no

answers. She blamed herself for letting him seduce her. She had wanted him as much as he had wanted her that night and she hated herself as much as she hated him for that night.

She had asked him to stay the night with her because she was finally ready to let him into her life. She had finally accepted what she felt for him. She had naively assumed that he was also ready to take their relationship to the next level and see where it went from there. And mainly, she had asked him to stay because she did not want to feel inconsequential, like she was just another one-night stand. But, he had done exactly that. He had used her and left her and she had never felt more humiliated in her life than she had that morning when she had woken up alone.

In the days following that fateful night, Raashi was heartbroken. She had not slept at all, eaten even less, hardly answered any calls, and barely lived, until the day when Sheena had come home to check on her, worried that something was wrong with her. One look at her and Sheena had hugged her tight and Raashi had poured her heart out to her.

Sheena had wanted to confront her cousin, but on Raashi's insistence, hadn't. And since Keya had been away on her honeymoon, they had decided to keep this incident only to themselves.

Slowly, Raashi had come around to being herself again. She had let Sameer Sehgal make a mess of her life, but she had come out of it stronger. She was never going to let him get close to her ever again. He was dangerous and judging the way she still responded to his touch, she had to stay away from him at all costs.

Chapter 3

Sameer woke up suddenly, wondering what had disturbed his sleep. This was one of the few nights he had actually been able to fall asleep the minute his head had touched the pillow. His phone vibrated. Still groggy with sleep, he took a look at his phone. It was his GM, the General Manager of his Hotel, The Marquis. A call so late at night, meant only one thing; there was a problem at the hotel. Sighing deeply, he rubbed his face and picked up the call.

Five minutes into the call, Sameer knew exactly what had happened at The Marquis. He heard his manager out and told him he would get there as soon as possible.

He changed quickly. He needed to get to The Marquis fast and there was only one person who could get him there in super speed. He left his room and walked across the hallway and knocked on his brother's door. There was no response and he really didn't have time, so this time he banged hard on the door. With no response again, he called him from his cell phone.

"Rishi?" Sameer spoke into the phone in an urgent tone, as his brother answered his call after a few rings. "Open the door, I have been knocking since ages."

"I need to go to The Marquis right now. There's a problem," Sameer told his brother as soon as the door opened.

"Now?" Rishi asked, yawning loudly. "What has happened?"

"One of the guests valet-parked their Audi at The Marquis and now it has gone missing. The guest is very disturbed and has called the cops. I need to get there as soon as possible."

Rishi rubbed his eyes. "You woke me up for this? Why do you need to be there? Why can't the GM handle this?"

"Because the car belongs to a politician's son who also happens to be grandfather's friend." Sameer took the name of the politician.

Sameer continued to explain. "Obviously, the son is cashing in on the friendship between his father and our grandfather and demanding to talk to the owner directly. He has caused quite a stir and is refusing to talk to the GM. Besides, he's a regular guest at the hotel and his company rents rooms

round the year at The Marquis. He is threatening to stop his business with us and has called the media already. I need to get down there and talk to him myself before this becomes a publicity nightmare.”

“God!” Rishi made a face. “Let me get dressed. I will meet you down in five.”

“Oh and take your bike, Rishi. We need to get there quickly,” Sameer said, as he walked out of his brother’s room, dialing the GM’s number to ask him about the latest update.

Sameer knew that bikes were Rishi’s pet passion. He raced bikes along with some biker friends of his very frequently. It was crazy and he and his parents had been trying to warn Rishi off this for so long. Then again, being reckless as he was, he didn’t pay any heed to them. But, however dangerous, he needed Rishi and his bike today. It was the fastest way to reach across to The Marquis, which was at the other end of Mumbai in Marine Drive. If he took his car, even at this late hour, it would take him at least forty-five minutes to reach there. On Rishi’s bike, however, they would be there in no time at all.

Just as they reached their garage, they heard a car pull in. Sameer watched his younger sister, Rhea park her car. Rhea was one of his twin sisters. Shauna and Rhea both studied in London until Rhea suddenly dropped out of her college. She had returned home three days ago without having informed any of them. Worried and anxious, his parents had tried to talk to her, but she had avoided speaking about why she had come back so suddenly, requesting them all to leave her alone. Something was going on with her but she refused to say what. Sameer had even tried to talk to his other younger sister many times but Shauna too remained tight lipped.

“Where are you coming from?” Rishi asked her, as she got out of her car and began walking towards the front door without as much as a glance at them.

“Out,” Rhea replied. She turned around to face them, her expression resolute.

“I can see that, Rhea, but where and who were you with?” Rishi questioned.

“I was out with friends, Rishi. I am not a child. I am an adult. Why don’t you treat me like one?”

“I will, once you behave like one.”

Sameer put a hand on his brother’s shoulder. Rishi turned to look at him and Sameer shook his head. He was concerned about their sister too. But right now they needed to get to his hotel. Rishi gave a frustrated sigh but remained silent.

Sameer’s cell phone rang again. “Yeah, I am coming. Twenty minutes.” He disconnected the call and ran his hands through his hair angrily. “Rishi, we need to be there now. The media is all over the incident.”

“What’s happening?” Rhea asked, as she saw Rishi rev up the engine of his bike.

“There’s been a car theft at The Marquis. We are just headed there,” Sameer told her.

“The Marquis?” Her eyes widened. “I was just there. When did this happen?”

“Less than an hour back.”

“My God, I left about the same time, I think.”

“Anyway, we need to be at The Marquis right this instant. Let’s talk later,” Sameer said, strapping his helmet on and getting on the bike behind Rishi.

The entire thing was a bigger mess than he had envisaged, Sameer realized upon reaching The Marquis. Sure enough, they had reached real quickly, but now there were cops everywhere, asking questions and a horde of reporters seeking a story. Sameer could see that a bunch of them were already interviewing the car owner whose car was stolen and the irrational man was basking in all the attention.

After speaking to the hotel staff and gathering the details of the incident by going through all the CCTV camera footage, Sameer had been able to piece together what exactly had happened.

A big party was being hosted in the hotel and with the valet service inundated with work, several guests had been waiting for the valets to bring their cars around. In all that chaos a young man had casually exited the hotel talking on his cell phone. He had coolly walked up to the valet who had just brought in an Audi to the porch. The young man had confidently tipped the valet and driven off with the car. The valet had not checked for the car tag

and simply opened the door to the man and accepted his tip. The actual owner of the car, Sameer could see in the video, had been busy chatting on his cell phone and hadn't even noticed that his car had been brought around and that someone had driven away with it.

It was as simple as that. The thief was dressed smartly. He looked like he was a hotel guest and no one had questioned him when he took the car from the valet.

It was only after several minutes had passed that the actual owner lost patience and had started to create a ruckus with the valet for the delay in getting his car, that they realized that something was amiss.

The car owner had threatened to sue The Marquis for negligence, which entailed Sameer waking up his father in the middle of the night seeking his legal counsel. His father, Jai Sehgal, ran the legal department of the Sehgal group and was a renowned lawyer in his own right. He confirmed what Sameer already knew, the owners could seek damages but it would become messy because hotels always disclaimed liability for the cars they parked in their premises. As a result, in order to avoid it getting ugly, Sameer would have to convince the owners to not sue.

But right now, tempers were flying high everywhere. He spoke to the politician's son, a young man with a gruff character, politely, so as not to ruffle any feathers and convinced him to go home and let them come up with a solution. He requested him to give the authorities a chance to look into the matter.

One silver lining was that he was happy how his staff at the hotel had stepped up and taken care of the situation. They had efficiently handled any questions posed by their guests, the media were dealt with and the cops were assisted professionally. The cops were now questioning some of the staff and they were waiting for hotel security to go through more CCTV camera footage to give them a better idea of how and when the thief had entered the hotel. A chain wide memo was also sent to all the Sehgal hotels to beef up their security.

Now, two hours later, the hotel was quiet and it was business as usual. Sameer stood in his hotel lobby and observed the hustle and bustle in the hotel.

His brother came up to him, "I hope this doesn't become a commercial

nightmare for us. It has been made into a circus.” Rishi handed his cell phone to Sameer. It was opened onto a popular social media site and sure enough Sameer could see the car owner’s interview posted there with pictures of The Marquis in the background. Rishi also showed him several other sites that had similar posts.

Sameer took a deep angry breath, “God! I hate the obsession people have with social media. It is just so unnecessary and blows everything out of proportion. Anyway, the crisis is averted for the night, so I think we can head on home now.”

“I have a better idea. Let’s go for a fast spin on my bike and this time you drive.”

“You’re joking, right?” Sameer asked and then narrowed his eyes. “Seriously?” he said again when Rishi continued to grin at him, his eyebrows raised.

“Come on, big brother, I know you’ve been in a bloody hellish mood for the last few days and now this incident seems to have ticked you off even more. Why don’t you let loose for once?”

Rishi was right. The theft at his hotel had him all worked up and the media backlash that could temporarily hamper the hotel’s image was annoying him immensely. But more than that what was exasperating was that ever since he had met Raashi again, he hadn’t been able to get her off his mind. He thought of her all the time, at work, at the gym, at home. He hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her and what had happened between them. He had been sleeping badly as well.

Probably living a bit recklessly and being a little wild like Rishi may prove to be good for him. It might just get his mind off his problems and off the beautiful hazel eyed woman who had come back into his life again.

“OK,” Sameer agreed, slowly nodding his head with a faint smile on his lips.

Rishi’s bike was a beauty and she was fast as well. Sameer lifted the front cover of the helmet that he was wearing to let the wind on his face. The speed and the headgear they were wearing made it impossible for them to talk. This time of the night, the city roads were practically empty and he could easily speed on the super-fast bike without any danger. The clean crisp breeze wafting off the sea felt good and he let go. Rishi had been right; he needed

this outlet.

But try as he might, he couldn't stop thinking of Raashi. Since the night he had met her at the restaurant, after all those months, she had constantly been in his thoughts. His mind was in a constant turmoil. He had pursued her, all those months ago, because he had wanted her, badly. She had asked him to be there with her in the morning, but their intensely passionate night had stirred in him emotions he had been unwilling to explore. And instead of facing the woman who had aroused so much in him, he had deserted her. He hadn't had the heart to tell her that there was no future for them, that he was just not capable of a relationship.

Since he had met her that day, he had been debating on what he had done. In the end, he always had come to the same conclusion that though it must have hurt her, leaving had been the right thing for him. Had he stayed, he would have jumped straight into a hot, heady, steamy affair with her. And he knew it would have muddled his mind and he had to admit, his heart too, which was something that he definitely did not want. He knew firsthand what it felt like when he had handed his heart on a platter to a woman; only to have it shattered. His experience with Natasha had made him immune to having a steady relationship with any woman again, not even Raashi.

But now his heart kept asking him questions. Questions that had always been there, which he had chosen to ignore. Questions that made him feel guilty, that he had blocked, but were now consuming him. And seeing her again, they kept coming back. He knew that in leaving her he had protected himself, but what about her? How had she felt when she had woken up to an empty bed in the morning? Had she been hurt, offended maybe or had she brushed off the encounter with him in her usual confident way? Of course, she must have been a bit hurt and livid too. Which woman, wouldn't be? He had walked away from their night together and never contacted her again.

But then Sheena had confirmed that Raashi was fine. Hadn't she?

Sameer recollected the evening he had met Sheena, a week after his night with Raashi. Sheena had met him at home for a family dinner and when he had bent forward to kiss her cheek, she had punched him hard on his shoulder and whispered to him, "You're a complete jerk and I hate you for what you did."

He had stepped back to look at her, confused at first and then seeing the anger in her eyes, he had immediately understood what she was referring to.

For a second his heart had melted and he had asked, “How is she?”

To which Sheena had given him an angry look and said, “Of course, she is fine. What did you think? That she’d be crying over an ass like you.” And she had walked off.

So Raashi obviously survived it, albeit hating him in the process. He had left her because for the first time in years a woman was able to break through the walls around his heart. Even when he had been pursuing her, he had known that Raashi was special. She made him feel things he hadn’t felt in a long time, feelings, he really didn’t want to feel.

Sameer shook his head. He had to stop this line of thinking. It wouldn’t get him anywhere. He was still unwilling to give his heart to any woman. So really these thoughts were useless.

He revved the accelerator of the bike up to a higher speed. The bike flew. There was something about speeding on a lean mean powerful bike that made you feel free. Sameer felt like he was flying. He had not done this in such a long time and it felt great. The thrill was indefinable. They were zipping across the Queen’s Necklace, one of the best stretches of road in Mumbai. Most of the skyscrapers of Mumbai were located on this stretch. Some of the best hotels in the city were located on the eastern side and the Arabian Sea Promenade bordering the west. At this speed all the sites just whizzed past in a blur.

After three wild, lightning fast, turns on the drive, he finally slowed down. Lifting up his helmet flap, he turned to Rishi, “That was thrilling.”

“I know,” Rishi concurred with a slight grin.

They had just gone past The Marquis, when Rishi asked, “Do you think she would have told us where she was if she hadn’t realized there was a problem at The Marquis?” Rishi was referring to their younger sister Rhea.

“Not voluntarily, no. Though I am quite sure if we checked our social media accounts we would have known sooner or later. Either she would have posted an update or her friends would have tagged her in theirs.”

“Yeah. Why is it so hard for her to give us a straight answer when we ask her anything?” Rishi paused for a second and then continued. “I cannot still digest the fact that she quit college without telling us or even talking to us.”

They were all worried about her. Something was going on with her and he

had to find out what. The twins were known to rebel all the time but this closed, unhappy and angry behavior was not like Rhea at all. She was usually happy-go-lucky, chirpy and fun. He had to get her to confide in him soon.

Knowing that they wouldn't get any answers unless their sister confided in them herself, Rishi changed the subject, "What about that property next to The Marquis? I thought you wanted to extend The Marquis onto it."

Sameer stopped the bike to look at the ancient villa that was lying nondescript and abandoned next to his hotel. It was prime property and it had belonged to his grandmother's family for ages. On her death, it had passed on to his grandfather and Sameer was planning to refurbish it and extend a new wing of The Marquis on it, since a while now. Sameer and Rishi both got off the bike and gazed keenly at the property again. It was not too big, about ten thousand square feet, but sufficient to add a new wing to one of his most prestigious and sought after hotels. The Marquis would really benefit from this expansion.

He wanted to add a spa wing to The Marquis. His spa would be one of the best city spas in the country, he would make sure of that. A tranquil oasis in the midst of a crazy, busy, city. He really had to discuss this with the board soon. Kabier would love what he had in mind and Rishi already knew his plans and was excited to get the ball rolling. So all that was left was to get a nod from their grandfather and they could get started.

"I am bringing this up in the board meeting on Monday. Let's see what the others have to say to this new idea," Sameer said as they both got back on the bike again.

He started driving at a low speed, all the while talking to Rishi, "I just hope...What the hell?" Sameer swerved his bike on to the side as a huge black SUV drove recklessly past him.

"Looks like more people having fun tonight, other than you and me," Rishi commented as his gaze followed the unruly SUV.

"Fun...more like mad people with a death wish," Sameer said. He stopped the bike to look at the black Porsche Cayenne SUV take a fast U turn and speed down on the opposite side of the road, the music from its speakers audible and loud even from where they were standing.

"Whoa. Did you see the plates on the Cayenne?" Rishi asked.

"No. Why?"

“Isn’t Kabier in London?”

“Uh huh.” Sameer replied.

“If Kabier is in London then who in the world is driving his car at four in the morning unless...”

“Unless, that’s Keya,” Sameer completed. “Come on,” Sameer said dropping down his helmet flap and revving the bike. “Let’s go say Hi!”

Chapter 4

“This feels just like old times!” Keya said happily from behind the steering wheel of the car. She was driving on the empty road like a pro.

“Absolutely,” agreed Sheena, who was sitting next to her.

“Yes, well other than the fact that both of you are married and have husbands now, it is like old times indeed,” Raashi said from the back seat.

Her two friends had surprised her by landing up at her place unannounced for dinner earlier in the evening. They had chatted long into the night. Both their husbands were out of town and neither of them wanted to call it a night so here they were zipping in Keya’s car, music blaring, at four a.m.

“Come on, let’s stop for some coffee,” Keya said, slowing down as The Marquis loomed up on their right. She took a U turn to head towards the hotel. She reached the gates of the hotel in no time, stopping for the security check.

Suddenly, a bike appeared on their side and came to a halt. The rear rider got off and knocked on Keya’s window. Raashi’s eyes met Keya’s panicked ones through the rearview mirror for a second just as Sheena leaned forward and exclaimed, “Oh look, it’s Rishi!”

Raashi saw Keya roll the window down as Sheena continued to talk excitedly, “Rishi! You gave us quite a fright.”

Sheena leaned forward again and said, “Huh! Is that Sameer riding the bike? Wow!”

Sameer! Raashi’s heart gave a loud thump. Despite all the self-control she had been exercising of late, when it came to reality, Raashi couldn’t control the quickening of her heartbeat. He was here. And then she heard Rishi tell Keya to meet them at The Marquis porch. She couldn’t believe it, she would be face to face with him in the next few minutes and there was no way out of this predicament.

Sameer parked the bike at the porch of The Marquis and waited with Rishi as Keya brought her car to a halt beside them.

“Hello, you two. Fancy meeting you guys here,” Sheena remarked, stepping out of the car. She came forward and gave him and Rishi both a hug

and then Keya walked up to them and did the same. Finally, he turned his head to see Raashi stepping out of the back seat of the car, walking slowly towards them, watching him closely. He looked back at her with a wry look and felt his lips curve. She turned her face, dismissing him entirely as she walked towards his brother.

Sameer saw his brother grin as he saw Raashi.

“Oh! Awesome. You’re here as well, Raashi. I thought it was just Keya and Sheena,” Rishi said enveloping her in a huge bear hug and then he held her for a second more and said softly, “Where have you been? I haven’t seen you around in a long time. Is everything okay?”

“I am fine, Rishi. What’s happening?”

“Sameer’s had a hard night. So right now we were just letting loose, racing on this beauty.” Rishi pointed to his prized possession.

“Wait a minute, Sameer was racing your bike?” Sheena asked, her eyes as wide as saucers.

Sameer rolled his eyes. “Yes, Sheena. I was riding the bike and yes I was speeding on it as well. Just because I don’t usually race bikes, doesn’t mean I don’t know how to.”

“But that’s so not you,” Sheena continued, “You’re too straitlaced for fun stuff!”

Sameer heard Rishi hoot in the background and Keya laugh. He turned to look at Raashi, who was unsuccessfully trying to smother a grin.

He gave Sheena a glaring look, but as usual it had no effect on her whatsoever. That it was an eye-opener for Sheena was not such a startling fact. Rishi was the dare devil in the family, not Sameer. But really, she was making a big fuss, which was unnecessary.

“Cut it out, Sheena!” Sameer snapped back.

Sheena had been at war with him ever since his one-night stand with Raashi and she used every opportunity she got to infuriate him. But right now what irked him the most was the fact that Raashi did not acknowledge him again and was snubbing him for the second time in the same week. Well, he wasn’t going to ignore her for sure.

“Hi, Raashi,” Sameer said and before she could even react, he had pulled her in his arms, hugging her way too tight and way too close.

Surprised by his behavior and not wanting to create a scene in front of the others, Raashi let him hug her and hold her too close than was necessary. She stood stiffly in his arms, trying not to show any sort of reaction to him even though her heart rumbled inside her chest.

Sameer stood back from her, still holding her arms and appraised her from top to toe. Her hair was tied into a high ponytail on top of her head. Slight strands of hair had escaped and were falling on the sides of her face. Her beautiful brown-green eyes were storming with angry heat and her luscious pink mouth was set in a straight line. She was dressed in blue denims and a fitted, bright red vee neck tee shirt that molded her curves. Sameer turned his gaze back onto her face and looked into her eyes. "You're ignoring me. I am hurt."

"Like hell you are!" Raashi said annoyed with him.

She tried to move free of him, but he held on tight and whispered softly, "Try harder, beautiful! I won't be ignored that easily."

He let go of her and took a step back. Raashi gave him a slithering look and moved to stand next to Keya.

Sameer felt a strong tug on his arm and turned to see Sheena giving him a silent warning. He shook himself off her and turned to follow the others as they headed inside the hotel.

They were all seated around a table in The Marquis' coffee shop, sipping caffeinated beverages of their choice, when Sameer asked Raashi, "Did you recently start working at AquaNox?"

Raashi grimaced inwardly. The past half an hour had passed smoothly and he had said exactly nothing, contributed naught to the conversation all around. He made her feel uncomfortable with just his presence. He had been staring at her as if she was some delicious morsel on a dessert platter. And she hadn't been able to stop looking at him. Tonight, he was dressed smartly in dark jeans and a dark shirt, sleeves rolled up. She was so lost in her own contemplation that she almost didn't realize that he had spoken aloud to her.

The conversation around them suddenly stopped. Raashi realized that everyone was looking at her, waiting for her to reply. He apparently didn't know that she owned the place. Thinking of it, he had never really paid any attention to her personal life in all the time he had been after her. His main intention obviously had been to get her into his bed and once that was done,

he was done with her. She looked from Keya to Sheena and finally replied nonchalantly, "Since its opening."

"I quite liked the place," Sameer said.

"Did you? Considering the circumstances of your departure, I didn't expect you to recommend it ever."

Ever since their last encounter at AquaNox, his curiosity about her had piqued. He wanted to know more about her and that's exactly why, now that she was sitting in front of him, he had asked her about AquaNox and her job there. But she wouldn't take the compliment easily. She had to bring up that part of the night as well.

Ever since that night he hadn't been able to get her off his mind at all. And now she was sitting within touching distance, her denim clad legs mere inches away from his. To add to that he had held her in his arms far too close and far too long for comfort. Having her in his arms had reminded him of the perfect way she fit to his body.

"Really! What happened?" Sheena questioned, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yes, do tell," Rishi said sitting up straighter. Sameer took a deep breath. These two just needed the slightest reason to cause trouble and now they were waiting with bated breath to hear about this particularly embarrassing incident.

"There's nothing to tell, except that Sameer's date didn't like the place too much," Raashi replied smoothly.

Sameer narrowed his eyes, surprised that she didn't elaborate the details of his embarrassment that night.

"Who were you with?" Sheena asked him.

"Natasha."

"Do you know that Sameer may be planning to..." Rishi started to say, before Sameer kicked him squarely under the table. Rishi promptly shut up.

Keya took up from Rishi, "Yes, Kabier mentioned that you're seeing her. But seriously, Sameer, Natasha Arya is spoilt, rude and only wants to get her own way everytime. I know you were crazy about her once, but I sure hope it's not the same now," Keya said in her usual matter of fact manner.

Sameer remained silent. It was so typical of Keya to say exactly what came to her mind. She was one of the few people who could get away by

saying anything to him. Apart from the fact that she was married to Kabier, she had become one of Sameer's closest friends. He already knew that Rishi wasn't too fond of Natasha and was actually against her being in Sameer's life. Rishi was there when he had broken up with her the first time and both he and Kabier knew how tough that break-up had been for him at that time.

But what Keya and Rishi and Kabier for that matter didn't know is that he didn't want any kind of relationship that could hurt him again. He didn't want love. Natasha was perfect for him in every way because she was not interested in any emotional attachment. That's how she had always been and that's how she still was. She had made it abundantly clear that she wanted companionship and the social prestige that she would get by being a part of the Sehgal family, if they indeed did marry. And of course she wanted him back. This time around the thought of being married to him definitely appealed to her. They could eventually be good companions for each other and have a comfortable existence together. They would give each other space and the freedom to lead their own lives. Their arrangement was purely business and he was happy that she knew and agreed with what she was getting into with him, that is, if things worked out.

But this was something he was sure none of the others would understand and hence he chose to remain silent.

Raashi had to agree with Keya's assessment. She surely hadn't liked Natasha much and was happy to know that her own opinion of the woman was not clouded by the fact that Sameer was dating her again.

"I agree with Keya, which makes me wonder what you find in her?" Sheena asked him.

"MYOB Sheena, MYOB. And in case you still didn't get it, Mind. Your. Own. Business," Sameer said rudely.

"I got it the first time, you jackass," Sheena countered, making a face at him.

"Children, can we please get along?" Rishi drawled from Sameer's side. "Your bickering is worse than the twins' these days."

Seeing Sheena's angry face, Raashi inserted herself into the conversation. "Oh! How are the lovely twins? Still keeping you guys on your toes?" she asked Rishi.

"They're the same. Always up to something. Rhea's back though," Rishi

replied looking down into his coffee mug.

“When did she come back? She hasn’t called me,” Sheena said looking at Keya.

“Not me either,” said Keya.

Raashi saw the look that passed between the brothers. They were worried about Rhea, she guessed. But then again the twins always did plenty of stupid stuff to make the boys worry. They were very rebellious and usually because they couldn’t tolerate the over protectiveness of their older siblings.

At twenty-one, they were sharp, confident, intelligent but a tad bit wild. They had a wonderful zest for life that unfortunately was not understood very well by their older brothers. They were nine years younger than Sameer and Kabier and seven years younger than Rishi, making them the babies in the family.

She continued to listen as her friends conversed with Rishi about the twins. Sameer, she noticed, seemed to be preoccupied and stressed. He kept checking his cell phone and twice already his staff had interrupted him. He had even stepped aside once to talk to them. Hearing a little commotion, she looked away from Sameer and saw some cops walking towards him. Spotting them, Sameer excused himself and left.

Keya spoke from her side interrupting Rishi, “By the way, I overheard you say earlier that Sameer had a rough night. Is that anything to do with why the cops are here talking to him?”

Rishi nodded and recounted the events of the night. No wonder Sameer looked so stressed, Raashi thought. He returned back to the table as the cops made their way out and Sheena and Keya asked him several questions. Sameer replied to their questions calmly but there was an underlying tension in his voice and in his stance.

Her phone buzzed and Raashi picked up. She smiled when she saw who was calling. Sameer though distracted couldn’t avoid noticing her reaction.

Keya and Sheena who were flanking her on both sides, squeezed close to her to see the caller ID and then Sameer heard Raashi say distractedly, “Uh, I’ll be right back.” And then she stood up and walked away to answer her phone call.

Sheena looked at Keya and grinned.

“What was that about?” Rishi asked.

“Oh! That was Rithwik on the line,” Sheena said pointedly.

“Rithwik Bali?” Sameer asked.

“The very same,” she replied smiling.

“How come he’s calling so late?” Sameer looked at his watch and his eyebrows creased, “Or should I say so early in the morning?”

“Back off, Sameer. It’s got nothing to do with you,” Sheena said rudely.

“Sheena!” Keya gasped.

“Now, that was uncalled for,” Rishi said. “Sameer is just concerned.”

“Oh really?” Sheena asked blithely, her eyes flaring in defiance.

Speechless at Sheena’s rude behaviour, Rishi and Keya just gaped at her in silence. Finally, breaking her silence, and attempting to lessen the tension, Keya held Sheena’s arm and said sweetly, “Oh, come on Sheena, it’s just Sameer and Rishi. And really you’re making too much of this. Nothing’s going on between them.”

“What’s not going on and between whom?” Sameer questioned, looking from Sheena to Keya.

“Rithwik and Raashi. Wouldn’t it be so cool if they’re together?” Sheena replied, resting her chin on her hand, a dreamy look in her eyes.

“Wait a minute. I didn’t know Raashi was seeing Rithwik,” Rishi said, voicing Sameer’s thoughts out loud. “Since when? Last time I saw them together was at your wedding, Keya, and nothing seemed to be going on then,” Rishi stated, looking confused.

Keya held her hand up when Sheena started to talk and said, “Well, honestly, I don’t think anything’s going on. Raashi and Rithwik have bonded a lot in the past few months ever since I got married. They meet very often and they seem to be closer than ever before. Although Sheena thinks that there is more to it, I don’t agree with her yet. Perhaps in future, if that’s what Raashi wants. I will be thrilled for her if that happens. ”

Raashi and Rithwik. Even the thought of her with that guy left a sour taste in his mouth. Rithwik was loud and brash and had this devil-may-care attitude towards everything. Whereas Raashi was quieter, she was careful and emotional and she thought too much. His eyes went to her talking softly on

the phone. Was she with Rithwik or were they just friends? God! He hoped that Keya was right because the thought of Raashi dating Rithwik was intolerable.

He knew Rithwik was her close friend. The story he had heard was that Rithwik and another friend Aditya had met Keya and Raashi on a camping trip several years back and they had hit it off since then. Rithwik was the owner of Fortuna International, a multimedia and telecommunication company originally, that had now diversified into various fields. They were as big as the Sehgal's and were strong competitors in various areas. Rithwik was extremely successful, very good looking and a strong player in business. And he knew how to charm women.

Raashi moved away from their table to answer her phone.

"Hi gorgeous!" drawled a sexy voice at the other end.

"Rithwik! It's almost five in the morning."

"That's no way to greet someone who has been thinking of you the whole day!"

"All right! Hi, Rithwik, and please, can you cut out the flirting," Raashi smiled.

"Oh, come on Raashi! Don't hurt my feelings now," Rithwik said.

"Rithwik, get serious. It's way too early in the morning for this. "

"I know you're up and out at The Marquis, so don't try to make me feel guilty about calling you."

"How do you know?"

"Oh! I have my sources."

"Yeah, right!"

"Okay! Status update by Sheena! *'Zipping around with my BFF's in the wee hours'* and then check-in at The Marquis with fifty hash tags at least!" Rithwik said gleefully.

Sheena had an excessive, unhealthy obsession with social media that maddened Raashi. But these days it was common for most people to be constantly reporting, chronicling, and recording their lives on social media. Raashi had always felt that she was the odd one out. She tuned back in to what Rithwik was saying.

“I was at a friend’s place for dinner and I was planning to head home when I saw Sheena’s post. Thus the call, Raashi. And since you refused to go out with me tonight and you’re still up, why don’t you make it up to me. Let me drive you home. I am close and can be there in five.”

“Uh, I am not sure. It’s really late and I...,” Raashi stopped mid-way when she caught a glimpse of Sameer looking at her strangely.

What was wrong with her? Rithwik was being so sweet. Not only was Rithwik one of her closest friends, he was great looking and so much fun to be with. For some reason they seemed to be drifting towards each other the past few months. They had met over lunch or dinner many times, but were not dating. Raashi liked being with him. She enjoyed his attention and felt comfortable with him. Most importantly, he didn’t make her heart flutter nervously or make her feel on the edge like she felt when she was around Sameer. He was safe! And she needed safe right now in life, right? How often had she told herself that she had to get over Sameer Sehgal? And Rithwik definitely was the right person to take her mind off Sameer.

She heard Rithwik’s voice coming through the phone, “Raashi, you there?”

“Oh, sorry...Okay fine, I’ll be out in a few minutes. See you on the porch.”

She hung up the phone and walked back towards the table.

Sheena and Keya turned to her when she returned.

“I need to go. Rithwik is waiting outside for me,” she told them.

“He’s here?” Keya asked, her eyes round with disbelief. “At this time? How come?”

Raashi explained.

Oh great! Sameer thought. The guy was shadowing her on social media now.

“We ought to leave too,” Keya said. Sheena nodded in agreement and they all got up, ready to head home.

Rithwik was waiting in his car, a huge black Hummer. On seeing Raashi, he got out of the car and came forward. He kissed both her cheeks and put his arm around her waist. She blushed a deep red when she saw Sameer staring at them, his arms folded in front of him. She felt his eyes following her, never

leaving her, even when Keya came forward to meet Rithwik.

Sameer saw Rithwik wink at Sheena and then he waved at Rishi and nodded his head towards him.

“Why is it that my two favorite girls are always surrounded by Sehgal men?” Sameer heard Rithwik say to Keya mischievously.

“Maybe because I am one of them now,” Keya replied back smiling at him.

“Thankfully, it’s only you. I lost you to a Sehgal, but at least I have Raashi still,” Rithwik said shrugging his shoulders with an impish smile. He turned to look at Raashi, “Let’s go. I have so much to talk to you about.”

Sameer finally took the breath he had been holding ever since he saw Raashi drive away with Rithwik Bali. He finally admitted to himself that he was still attracted to her. But he also knew that this attraction was going to land him in trouble. He had spent enough time with her in the past to know that she was the type of woman who could make a man completely forget himself. She was too dangerous to be around. He knew where his path lay. Seeing her again was messing up his mind. He had to stay away from her.

Chapter 5

Janak Sehgal stared into the faces of his grandsons, waiting for a response and said quietly, “I gifted it!”

“You did what?” Sameer shot up to his feet and yelled.

“Sameer, watch your tone. I am still your grandfather,” Janak scolded.

Sameer rubbed his forehead, trying to reduce the pounding that had started since this morning when he and Kabier had found out that they didn’t own their grandmother’s property anymore.

He had asked Kabier and Rishi to meet with him today at his office. He had finally discussed about his dream spa project in detail with them. His grandmother’s property next to The Marquis hotel had an old heritage bungalow and Sameer wanted to restore it, extend it and convert it into a spa. It would be an extension of The Marquis. Kabier and Rishi had loved the idea so much that they had called for the land documents immediately to begin the planning. But then to their absolute shock they had found out that the property no longer belonged to them. And now grandfather was telling them very coolly that he had gifted the property away.

“When did you do this, grandfather?” He heard Kabier ask calmly.

“Not so long ago,” Janak Sehgal replied nonchalantly.

“And you did this without even thinking of informing any of us?” Sameer queried angrily.

“Just because I have handed over the reins of the business to you guys doesn’t mean that I am suddenly answerable to you three. That was my land, and I decided to gift it to someone who fell in love with it and has a wonderful vision for it.”

“And that’s it?” Sameer heard his brother Rishi ask from behind him.

Sameer saw his grandfather simply shrug his shoulders in reply.

What was wrong with the old man? How could he have just handed over a prime piece of Sehgal property, the most beautiful bungalow, the most perfect land to someone else? It was unbelievable.

“What am I supposed to do about my plans for the land now?” Sameer asked, quietly seething in fury and disbelief.

“Well, I am sorry but today is the first time I have heard of this plan of yours. The idea has merit, my boy. But I guess you will have to do it somewhere else.”

“No,” Sameer shook his head in disagreement. “It has to be there. This is no ordinary spa I am talking about. I want to create something exotic. This location was unique because we could have connected it to The Marquis. Imagine enhancing the status of The Marquis to a resort hotel within the city. It’s not going to work anywhere else.”

“I agree with him,” Kabier said.

“Well, so we’ll just have to buy it back,” said Rishi.

“That doesn’t make sense, Rishi,” Sameer told his brother.

“Why? The land obviously doesn’t belong to us anymore and you want to build a world-class spa in that villa and connect it to The Marquis. Once done, it will make The Marquis one of the most sought after hotels in the city, not to mention probably the country. So?” Rishi asked tilting his head and raising his eyebrows in question.

Sameer ran his hands through his hair impatiently. He rued the fact that he hadn’t discussed his plans with his grandfather earlier.

“Whom does it belong to?” Kabier asked interrupting his thoughts.

Sameer saw his grandfather turn to look at him as he replied, “Raashi.”

Sameer felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. Raashi! Oh, My God! Why of all the people had his grandfather chosen her to gift this land to? This was so not happening to him. He could judge trouble from a distance when it was on the horizon. And this was just that. Disaster waiting to happen! There was no way Raashi would sell the land to him. He knew that.

“Why, why her?” Sameer asked as patiently as he could.

“I don’t need to justify my actions to any of you. Suffice it to say that I felt she was the best person to value the importance of that land. She fell in love with the place the first moment she laid eyes on it and I could see the passion with which she viewed it. That day, standing at the threshold of that old villa, she had an immediate vision for that decrepit place. I was floored hearing her thoughts. That land was hers from that day on.”

“Then we are left with no option but to negotiate with her to get the land back,” Kabier said solemnly.

“I can tell you that it would be a waste of time but that’s up to you guys. And now if your inquisition of me is over, I will see myself out.” He stood up and walked towards the door of the office. But before he got to the door, he turned to Sameer and asked, “Do you have any new updates on the car theft at The Marquis?”

They were all worried about the security breach at The Marquis and just a few hours back the hotel GM had brought Sameer up-to-date regarding the theft.

“Actually, yes. The police found the stolen car a few kilometers away from The Marquis, just today. It was left there with the keys inside. Fortunately, no damage was done to it. The car is being returned to the owner as we speak.”

Kabier frowned. “That is strange. What do the cops think? Was it a prank played on the owner or something?”

“We know the owner’s father is an important politician. And politicians do tend to make enemies, don’t they? Or it could be just a prank like you said or even a car theft gone wrong. Who knows?” Sameer stated.

“Good! Looks like we have nothing to worry about then. I will speak to the boy’s father and ensure they don’t cause any more trouble,” Janak Sehgal said. He nodded to his grandsons and left.

“I can’t believe he just gave away the property,” Rishi said pacing in front of the two of them, as soon as the door to Sameer’s office shut behind their grandfather.

Kabier shook his head and said, “It’s unlike him to do something so impulsive. I wonder what he was thinking.”

“Well, what do we do now?” Rishi asked.

“Sameer, will you get in touch with Raashi and negotiate a deal with her?” Kabier asked him.

“Yes. Though I am not really sure about this,” Sameer was extremely annoyed with the situation. He angrily ran his hand through his hair. “I really fail to understand what Raashi will do with such a prime piece of real estate. She works in a restaurant for heaven’s sake!”

“What are you talking about?” Rishi asked.

“Raashi works at AquaNox right?” Sameer repeated. He was bewildered

by the shocked expression on his brother's face.

He saw Rishi and Kabier exchange a bemused look. Raising a frustrated hand, he asked, "Okay. What do I not know?"

"Have you heard of The Nox restaurants?" Kabier asked.

"Of course! Aren't they the same ones that include Nox-MixGrill, T-Café and the more recent AquaNox restaurant? They have been doing increasingly well in the last five years, isn't it? Incidentally, that's where Raashi works, doesn't she?"

"T-Café was once a small cafeteria catering to college kids. Of course, it wasn't the same upscale café that it is now," Kabier said.

"So?" Sameer still did not understand where Kabier was going with this.

"Sameer, Raashi's family owned T-Café. Raashi's grandmother ran the café after Raashi's parents died in a car crash. Then Raashi inherited it after her grandmother's demise. Our grandfather has helped her ever since her grandmother passed away, until she was capable of running things on her own. And Raashi has turned that one single cafeteria into one of the most sought after café's in the city. She's also converted a section of it into a book bar where book readers of all ages are welcome. It now has a bookstore and a book club. Book signing and reading sessions happen there frequently. I have heard that you have to book months in advance to hold a reading there. It's that busy," Kabier said.

Rishi continued from where Kabier stopped.

"And then she decided one day that this wasn't enough for her. She invested all her savings, took a loan and opened Nox-MixGrill. It opened to rave reviews. That place you have to see to believe. The Friday rock shows she hosts there are legendary. She's now opened AquaNox and slowly but surely her Nox Group of restaurants is taking Mumbai by storm."

Sameer leaned back in his chair, utterly at a loss for words. Raashi was the owner of The Nox Group. Why had he never bothered to look into what she was doing? Why had he never asked her about her personal life? He remembered being absolutely enchanted by her, but the thought of asking her what she did for a living had never even entered his head back then. He had shown no interest in that part of her life at all.

Suddenly, a lot of things fell into perspective. He remembered the

authority she had at AquaNox. No wonder she had thrown him and Natasha out so unceremoniously. And she was aware about him not knowing that she owned The Nox group of restaurants. She hadn't even tried to correct his misconception either when he had asked her about AquaNox at The Marquis.

He was so lost in thought that Kabier had to nudge him to get his attention. He turned to look at his cousin and brother, a bewildered look on his face.

"You really didn't know!" Rishi stated with disbelief. "I mean all through Sheena's wedding and then through Kabier's, you stuck to her like glue and you didn't ask her even once what she did for a living or where she worked?"

Sameer shrugged his shoulders.

"While we're on the subject, I didn't want to pry, but what did happen between you two back then? You got along so famously that something seemed to be on the cards. Then suddenly after Kabier's wedding reception, Raashi disappeared from all our lives and now you're planning to..." Seeing that Sameer was about to interrupt, Rishi quickly corrected his statement. "... OK, considering to marry Natasha. I sensed a deeper connection between Raashi and you. What went wrong?"

"Rishi, just stop, I don't want to talk about this," Sameer said bluntly.

"Hang on! Let's rewind a bit," Kabier held up his hand. "Earlier when I asked you to talk to Raashi and negotiate a deal, you said you weren't sure about that. Why?"

Sameer took a deep breath and replied, "She's not going to want to sell to me."

"And why is that?" Rishi asked narrowing his eyes.

Sameer gave his brother a stern look and before he could say something in response, he heard Kabier say, "Sameer, why don't you tell us what's really going on?"

Sameer looked at his brother and cousin, two of his closest confidantes. The three of them practically knew everything about each other's lives. This was probably one of the rare situations he hadn't told them about. How was he to explain to them the messy situation between Raashi and him? That he was the cause of this mess. And because of that, he might not be able to construct his dream project.

Closing his eyes for a second, he confessed, “I slept with her.”

“What?” Kabier and Rishi said together, exchanging a quick surprised glance.

Sameer observed their scandalized expressions, and remained silent. Rishi pulled up a chair and sat on it folding his arms together, “Out with it then. Are you going to share the details or not?”

Sameer stood up and walked up to the full wall length windows of his office. Staring at the view below, he started to explain.

“I think I was attracted to Raashi the first time I saw her. I couldn’t get my eyes off her. She made my blood sing every time she came close to me. I knew I just had to have her. But she treated me like she did any of you, like a friend. The first time I knew she felt something for me was during that damned game we had played on board Rajiv’s yacht. Remember when I was paired with her and I licked the salt off her neck?” Sameer asked, turning to look at the two of them.

Both Rishi and Kabier nodded their heads remembering the incident.

“She melted to my touch then. I could see that finally I had invaded her defenses and caused havoc with her feelings. I started openly pursuing her. I made it abundantly clear to her that I wanted her. Then on the night of your wedding reception, Kabier, she looked so stunning that I knew I couldn’t wait any longer. That was the night I seduced her into my arms and into my bed.”

Sameer shut his eyes for a moment recollecting the explosive night he had spent with Raashi. How much being in her arms had meant to him! He had never felt like that with any other woman. She had been absolutely perfect in every way.

Kabier and Rishi looked at each other stumped, baffled by what they were hearing.

“What happened next?” Kabier’s question jerked him back to reality.

“The next morning, I left before she woke up.”

“You left?” Kabier asked, his eyes wide.

“Well, I hadn’t promised her the happily ever after...”

“Hang on, one second,” Kabier said raising his voice, “You had sex with her and then you left? Was she okay with that?”

“I don’t think so. She had asked me to stay the night with her and I didn’t. So I doubt she was OK with it, Kabier.”

“I can’t believe this is you we’re talking about. How could you do that to her? Sameer, this was not a random woman you met somewhere. This was Raashi. Sheena and Keya’s best friend,” Kabier said.

“I know that. But I never spend the night with any of the women I sleep with. Being there in the morning with them means I am interested in taking the relationship further, which I never am and so I always leave,” Sameer said, trying to defend himself and knew he was failing miserably.

“Exactly the point, Sameer. Raashi isn’t like your other women who probably know and understand this. She’s different. She slept with you because she must have felt strongly for you. She asked you specifically to stay with her the whole night just to ensure that you felt something for her in return as well. That she was important enough for you to stay and to figure out how to take things going forward. She wanted more,” Kabier said angrily. “It’s not like you don’t know how to stay away from women who want that little more from you than you are prepared to give. So I just fail to understand why you did this.”

Sameer sorted Kabier’s words in his mind. He had absolutely no response to give. Kabier was right. Thankfully, he didn’t need to respond because Rishi asked, “But then what happened? Didn’t you meet her again, like bump into her somewhere?”

“No, for three months I avoided being in any place I knew she was going to be and I was traveling a lot as well, so I didn’t meet her. But two weeks back I had taken Natasha out for dinner to AquaNox and Raashi was there. I thought she worked at that restaurant. I had always wondered how she would react when we met again. I expected her to be cold and formal, which she was. But I wasn’t prepared for how mad she was at me. She dumped an entire bowl of piping hot pasta on my lap and then threw us out. Little did I know at that time that she owned the restaurant. And the next time I met her was last week when...”

He stopped mid-sentence and regarded both Rishi and Kabier. The two of them were looking at each other strangely and then suddenly they burst into laughter. He gave them a moment and then said, “Guys. Can you cut it out? It wasn’t so funny.”

But they wouldn't stop. They continued to laugh and make fun of him.

"Enough, OK you guys," Sameer said again.

Still laughing, Rishi said, "You deserved that. Wish I was there to see that."

"No wonder you're so confident that she will not sell the land to you. Anyway, what's done is done. What do we do now? We need that land, Sameer," Kabier said.

"I know, I'll do something," Sameer responded.

"You need to sort it all out. Work your magic and get her to like you enough to sell the land. And if you can't, I'll talk to her because I know for sure she will not refuse me," Kabier told him confidently.

"I can talk to her too," Rishi offered. Sameer glared at him in turn.

"I said I'd do something about it. You both don't need to get involved. This is my project and I'll get it done, no matter what," Sameer spoke with a sharpness that was quite unlike him.

"One more thing, I know Keya doesn't know, otherwise she would have told me about it. What about Sheena or grandfather?" Kabier asked.

"I don't think grandfather knows. But Sheena is aware of the whole situation."

"That's why Sheena's been so rude to you the past few months. I didn't quite understand why, though it was entertaining as hell. I thought it was some silly tiff you guys were having because you didn't do something that she asked you to or some other inane reason. But I like this more and more," Rishi said smiling in glee.

"You know I will have to tell Keya," Kabier said looking at him playfully. Sameer just nodded his head.

"More fun! Can I come and watch when Keya gives you a verbal bashing?" Rishi asked Sameer, almost beaming with pleasure.

"Rishi, behave," Sameer said sternly.

Rishi made a face at him, "And now that I think of it, I now realize why Raashi was so cold to you the other night when we bumped into the three of them when they were out driving so late."

"What are you talking about?" Kabier asked looking confused.

“Sheena, Raashi and Keya. We met them on their night out. They were driving their car at full speed at four in the morning. The streets were almost empty, so they were enjoying their little speedy adventure,” Rishi replied distractedly.

“The girls were racing a car in the middle of the night? I don’t know anything about this,” Kabier remarked, alarmed.

“You were in London last week,” Sameer said.

“And my wife takes full advantage of me being away to be in a speeding car for fun and then forgets to mention anything about it?” Kabier looked just about ready to explode.

Sameer exchanged a look with Rishi.

“There’s more?” Kabier asked the two of them, not missing the look they had exchanged.

“Uh, actually, it was Keya who was racing the car and it was your Cayenne that she was driving,” Rishi said.

Kabier stood up, “My God!” he said. “I am going home. I need to have a very serious conversation with my wife.”

Sameer saw him take a deep breath to calm himself and then turn to look at him and say, “I trust the land issue will get resolved.”

“Yes, you can count on it.”

Kabier waved at the two of them and marched out of Sameer’s office.

Chapter 6

“God! You’re scaring me, Raashi,” Janak said. “What is wrong with Keya and why is Kabier not with her?”

“She spoke strangely to me on the phone. I wonder why she has called us here. She was to meet us at AquaNox for dinner,” Raashi said turning into the driveway of Kabier and Keya’s house.

The house stood eerily quiet and dark. “This is strange. Why are none of the lights on?” Janak observed.

Raashi frowned. “Come on. Let’s find out what’s happening here.”

They walked towards the main door. Janak rang the bell not taking his finger off it and when there was no response he twisted the knob of the door. It was open. With a worried frown, Janak stepped into the house with Raashi following him.

The moment Janak took a step into the hallway, the lights came on with a chorus of “Surprise” and “Happy Birthday”. He gave a stunned look to Raashi who was now standing right beside him. She gave him a wide grin in return.

Raashi stood at the side quietly as Janak’s friends and family immediately surrounded him to wish him. Keya, Sheena and she had planned this little celebration for Janak’s birthday. He was eighty today and had refused to celebrate his birthday as was usual. But unlike other years they weren’t going to let this landmark birthday go uncelebrated. They had plotted and planned this surprise for him. He had been a pillar of strength and support to each of them for so long now and it gave her the greatest joy seeing the smile lighting up his dear face.

She saw Sameer’s sister Rhea bring out a two tiered cake with several candles lit. Raashi clapped with everyone as Janak blew out his candles and cut the cake.

“You knew?” he asked, as he finally came towards her.

“Of course, I did,” Raashi smiled at him kissing his weathered cheek. “Happy Birthday to you,” she said. Janak put his arm around her shoulder.

“You think we would have let your 80th birthday go unnoticed?” Keya

said as she joined them. Janak held out his other arm and Keya stepped into it, naturally.

“Happy, Happy Birthday. You know we love you the most,” said Sheena who joined the three of them, easily becoming a part of their circle. “Come on. Let’s click some pictures.”

Sameer watched as his grandfather laughed and chatted with the three girls who meant the world to him. Sheena was clicking selfies and all of them were posing and pouting, his grandfather with them enjoying all the way. But he found his eyes drifting back to Raashi standing by his grandfather’s side, his arm around her.

Her teal blue strappy dress hugged every curve and her spiky, shiny heels made her legs look amazing. Her lips were painted a berry red and her long hair was flowing behind down her back. His mouth had dropped open when the lights had switched on and he had seen her enter with his grandfather. He still couldn’t stop staring at her. But so far she had ignored him as was expected.

It had hurt him when he had found out that his grandfather had gifted the villa and its surrounding land to Raashi. But he had come to terms with it. He would just buy it back from her. She would have no choice but to interact with him because of the land and he was thrilled at that aspect. She wouldn’t be able to ignore him forever. He would ensure that. Though why he was keen on spending time with her and why he wanted her to pay him notice was another question. Right now all he knew was that her indifference was grating on his nerves.

“They have such a special bond,” Kabier said, looking at their grandfather and the three girls.

“The girls have put in a lot of effort to make this special for him,” Rishi commented, flanking Sameer’s other side.

“Yes, I can see that,” Sameer said, looking at the birthday décor in Kabier’s home. The entire ceiling was filled with black balloons with the number 80 printed in block letters on it. Gold streamers were strung from the ceiling in tandem with the balloons making the room look festive. The huge living room was converted into a party space with a bar on one side and a dance floor in the center. Soft music played in the background. There were just about thirty or so people who were close to his grandfather present.

“So, did you guys contribute anything to this party or were you just required to show up?” Sameer heard his sister Rhea speak as she came and stood next to the three of them.

“Oh! We just had to be here on time. That’s all the instructions those three gave us,” Rishi replied naughtily.

Kabier turned and put an arm around Rhea affectionately. “So, when are you coming home to have a chat with Keya and me? We have been asking you ever so often to come over.”

Sameer knew that Kabier was as worried about Rhea as Rishi and he were. Rhea still stubbornly refused to confide in any of them. No one knew why she had dropped out of college and returned from London. Now he waited to see what his sister said next because knowing her and her black mood these days this conversation could go sour very quickly.

Rhea looked at Kabier with a frown, “Are you guys genuinely interested in a nice, pleasant chat with me or are you going to interrogate and lecture me about dropping out of college?” She asked him clearly. “Because if that’s the case then I am not wasting my time. As it is that’s about the only conversation that these two want to have with me.”

She shrugged off Kabier’s arm and stared at the three of them defiantly as each of them exchanged a concerned look.

“You don’t need to be rude to him, Rhea,” Rishi said angrily. “He’s worried about you just like the rest of us.”

“Yeah, right. As if you guys are actually worried about me. You are only concerned that I took such a big decision all by myself without consulting any of you. I am not a kid and I can decide what I want for myself. Anyway, don’t you three have better things to do than gang up against me? Why can you not just leave me in peace?” she said rudely.

“Hey,” Kabier said raising his hands up. “I meant no harm, sweetheart. You can come over any time. I promise just to spend time with you. I will not ask any questions that you don’t want me to.”

Sameer saw that his reply seemed to please Rhea because she smiled at Kabier and leaned up and kissed his cheek. “In that case, I am sorry. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that,” she told him softly.

She then turned to look at Rishi and Sameer and gave them an icy stare.

Sameer could see that Rishi was simmering with rage. Sameer knew that Rishi was at the end of his tether with Rhea. He had tried his best to talk to her but she was refusing to open up. Almost all their conversations these days ended in shouting matches. Sameer was also quite frustrated with her behavior. He shook his head anxiously as he saw his brother and sister glare at each other.

Before he could step in and stop the storm that was waiting to erupt, he saw his father walk towards them.

Jai Sehgal playfully patted Rhea on the head and put his arm around her. “Rhea, I need to ask you a favor?”

Rhea looked at their father and smiled softly. “Anything, Dad.”

Sameer saw his dad squeeze her shoulder and say, “There’s something I need you to do.” And then he whispered something to her that none of them could hear.

Rhea stared at her dad for a second. “You’re too cute, Dad.”

As soon as she left, Jai Sehgal turned to the three of them. “Hmm, now that she’s gone let me give you all a piece of advice. Going after her day in and day out is not going to get her to tell you anything. Give her a break. You need to stop pushing her. Rishi, especially you.” He waited till they all nodded reluctantly and continued, “I know you’re worried about her. So am I. She will come around in her own time. She’s home and she’s safe and that’s what is important.”

Sameer saw his father watch as Rhea reached their mother and pass his message to her. He saw his mom look around the room to find her husband. As soon as their eyes met, she smiled and walked towards him. Sameer saw his father return her smile and saunter towards his wife to meet her midway.

His parents reached each other. His father said something that caused her to blush and shake her head. They circled each other slowly before his mother once again shook her head and returned to her friends.

It was always like that with his parents. They were each other’s yin and yang. His father was tall with salt and pepper hair with a silent and broodingly intense personality, while his mother was petite, vibrant and loud. Her regular visits to the salon ensured that she didn’t have a single grey hair on her head. They fit together perfectly.

It's not like they were always happy. God No! Their dynamically opposite personalities caused them to fight and argue often. And at those times Sameer had seen the both of them miserable without the other. But they made up quickly and he mostly remembered them as being immensely happy together. They all had grown up seeing their example of love. No wonder subconsciously they all sought that. Even Sheena and Kabier. Their own father had passed away very young but Sameer's parents had always been a very essential part of their lives. That was also one reason why all of them were so close and so attached to each other.

If his grandfather was the thread that wove them all together then his parents were the glue that bound them all.

Both Sheena and Kabier had learnt from his parent's example to crave that kind of abiding love and luckily they had found it.

At one time he thought he had found that kind of love with Natasha but he had been bitterly disappointed. After that he hadn't wanted to try again.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and came face to face with Natasha.

"Hey," she said. "Sorry, I am late."

Sameer had forgotten he had invited her to attend the birthday party. He had asked her to be here before his grandfather arrived. But as usual Natasha did things in her own way. This was not new to him though. He sighed inwardly as he moved forward to greet her.

"Hi, Natasha," Sameer said. He saw her greet Kabier and Rishi as well.

"Come on," he told her. "Let's go wish grandfather. Excuse us, guys,"

Natasha held his arm as he steered her towards his grandfather. Janak still had his arm around Raashi, Sameer observed. Raashi realizing they were coming towards them, tried to walk away from the group. Sameer's lips curved into a smile as his grandfather said something to her and didn't let her leave his side.

Raashi saw Sameer approach with Natasha on his arm and felt a slight stab of envy pierce her heart. Dressed in designer jeans and a dark vee necked t-shirt, he looked great as usual. Natasha was wearing a short and silver dress that looked stunning on her. Raashi saw Natasha tug at Sameer's arm and he leaned down as she whispered something in his ear. She couldn't help but

stare at them. They did look fabulous together.

She had spotted him as soon as she had come inside the house. His gaze had heated as his eyes traveled up and down her body. Raashi had felt her toes curl at his very obvious appraisal of her. She had looked back at him and when their eyes met she had dismissed him coldly, deliberately turning away from him. She had managed to ignore him so far, but now here he was walking towards them, his eyes on her, watching her every move.

She shifted and tried to move away from Janak again. She didn't want to meet Sameer. She didn't want to talk to him. But Janak held her shoulder tight and said, "Don't go, Raashi. Stay here with me, okay?"

Wordlessly, she nodded and waited as Sameer approached them with Natasha on his arm.

"Grandfather, I would like you to meet Natasha," Sameer brought Natasha forward.

"Hello, there," Janak said, finally releasing Raashi. He held his hand out to Natasha. Raashi saw Natasha grasp his hand and lean forward to kiss his cheek as she wished him a happy birthday.

Natasha saw her and recognized her but immediately dismissed her like she was of no consequence. Raashi felt her temper rise at such a deliberate insult.

Natasha turned to Sheena and Keya and cheerfully greeted them. Immediately, Natasha engaged Janak and the other two girls in some random discussion, trying her best to keep Raashi out of the conversation.

Disgusted with Natasha's petty behaviour, Raashi turned her face. She found Sameer watching her while the others continued chatting.

"Hello, Raashi," Sameer said, tilting his head to the side and looking straight into her eyes.

"Hi!"

"You're ignoring me again," he said softly, his eyes dancing with laughter.

Why did he always have to be so smug and confident? With just a look and a few words he had managed to rattle her composure completely. Raashi was annoyed more with herself than him.

"Really, I hadn't even noticed you. Did you just arrive?" Raashi asked

sweetly. It was a feeble and silly attempt at retaliation but that was all she could manage at this point. Appearing calm and unaffected in his presence was taxing enough for her.

He gave a bark of laughter. "That is absolute nonsense and you know it. You noticed me the moment you reached here. Just like I noticed you." He raised his left eyebrow in challenge.

Raashi moved a step to the side. She needed him to stop toying with her. He was infuriating her by his conduct. He had ended whatever it was that had started between them when he had walked out on her that night. He had made it very clear that he had not been interested in a relationship with her, so why was he playing these games with her now? She was going to end this, whatever it was, once and for all. She stepped to a side, away from the others, so she could have this much needed conversation with him in private. Sameer followed her.

"What do you want, Sameer? You are deliberately being provocative. You have taunted me every time we have met recently. What are you after, this time?" she hissed at him angrily.

Sameer had not expected her to be so direct. He stared at her for a moment, not saying anything, his smile vanishing quickly. She had always been very bold and got to the point quicker than he could even blink. She was right. He didn't know what he was doing. He only knew that he enjoyed throwing her off balance. She had made it more than obvious that she wanted nothing to do with him and had avoided him whenever they had come across each other. Each time she met him she pretended as if nothing had ever transpired between them. As if they had never touched, as if she hadn't writhed in ecstasy in his arms on that one night.

He hated that she could so easily snub him while he couldn't for the life of him ignore her. She was standing so close to him now that her soft scent enveloped him. It was fruity and fresh and the urge to touch her was growing out of control for him, whereas she stood cool as a cucumber, pretending to be unaffected by him. Didn't she know better than to throw her indifference constantly in his face? Didn't she remember how much he relished such challenges?

"The thing is, Raashi, you give out this arctic cold vibe to me all the time and I cannot resist but lighting a match to heat up all that ice," Sameer said casually.

“You’re just too much,” Raashi said angrily. “Do you ever stop to think how your actions and conduct could affect someone else? Oh wait! I forgot that playing with people and their emotions is second nature to you.” She held up her palm to stop him when he started to say something. “This has got to stop. I refuse to participate in whatever game you are playing. So, leave me alone.”

She started to walk away when Janak called out to her, “Raashi, come here. Have you met Natasha?”

Directing a final glare at Sameer, Raashi took a step back towards Janak. “I did briefly meet her when Sameer had brought her to AquaNox. Hello, Natasha,” Raashi said looking at her.

Natasha gave her a haughty nod in response.

“I see you two have been catching up,” Janak said, warmly looking from Raashi to Sameer. “Sameer, did you already discuss with Raashi about the land you want back from her?”

Raashi raised her eyebrows. “What land? The one next to The Marquis?” When Janak nodded, she turned to look at Sameer with a furrowed brow. “You want my land?” she asked, surprised.

“Actually, it was my land. Grandfather gifted it to you without knowing my plans for it. So, yes, I want it back. I will pay for it, of course,” Sameer answered her brazenly.

Raashi’s mouth opened and closed in shock and then fury. How dare he think she would sell it? How dare he assume that money could get him whatever he wanted?

“That land is not for sale,” Raashi said through pursed lips.

“Everything has a price, Raashi. One just needs to know how high to bid for it.”

Cocky, overconfident, bastard. Raashi almost said that aloud but then she realized they were in public and Janak, Keya, Sheena and Natasha were all watching them. Therefore, she said instead, “You can bid as high as you wish, I am not selling.”

Sameer smiled at her insolently. “We shall see.”

Janak interjected before she could say something nasty and it all went out of hand. “Hey, you two. This is no way to behave. Business is not to be

conducted here. Leave the work talk for another day, will you?”

Raashi narrowed her eyes and fixed Sameer with a look that conveyed all the fury and irritation she felt at his brash behavior, but before she could react, she saw Rithwik entering the room. Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm her temper and then smiled at Rithwik as he came closer.

“Hello, people,” he said. “Happy Birthday, Mr. Sehgal.” Rithwik wished Janak, shaking hands with him. Then he turned to Raashi and Keya. “My favorite girls. Sorry, I am late. I just returned to the city, you know that right?”

“I am just glad you’re here,” Keya said.

“Me too,” Raashi said.

Rithwik then turned to Sameer. Raashi saw Rithwik shake hands with him. He chatted with Natasha and Sheena briefly. Of course, he knew Natasha. They moved in the same elite social circles and knew one another.

He turned back to her and Keya, “Come on, you two. I am going to steal you both away for a bit. Let’s get a drink and catch up.”

Sameer watched with narrowed eyes as Rithwik Bali confidently and quickly steered the two girls away to the bar at the further end. He knew that the three of them were really close and that they had been friends since years, but Sameer did not like the possessive way Rithwik’s arm was curved around Raashi’s waist.

“Stop glaring at her and leave her alone, Sameer,” Sheena gripped his arm and whispered to him.

Sameer brushed her arm off. “You need to stay out of things that do not involve you in any way.”

She cast him an angry look. Sameer ignored her, his eyes still on Raashi and Rithwik. Sheena subtly maneuvered their grandfather away, leaving Sameer alone with Natasha.

“How does that girl from the restaurant have such rich influential friends?” Natasha asked Sameer, flicking her head towards the bar where Raashi was standing with Keya and Rithwik.

“They’re her close friends and the fact that they are rich or influential has got nothing to do with it,” he said defending Raashi.

“You seem to be well acquainted with her. Anyway what was the land

thing your grandfather was talking about?”

“Oh, nothing...nothing,” Sameer shook his head. “Just some business deal between Raashi and me.” Sameer replied to Natasha, not really paying attention to Natasha’s questions. His eyes hadn’t strayed from Raashi even once throughout their conversation.

Rithwik was ordering drinks at the bar and Sameer could see him get some shots for the three of them. He offered one to Keya who refused vehemently. Raashi, he saw, accepted the shot, clicked glasses with Rithwik and downed the shot quickly. They promptly ordered the next round. He saw Sheena, her husband Rajiv, Rishi and Kabier join them, the entire group laughing and drinking joyously together. He then noticed Rishi gesturing the deejay to change the music. The music changed immediately to a loud and racy number. Already moving their bodies to the rhythm of the new song being played, the merry group moved to the dance floor together.

“So, it’s just business between Raashi and you?” Natasha asked astutely as she saw Sameer’s attention fixed on Raashi.

Sameer turned to Natasha. “Purely business,” he replied nonchalantly. Then he smiled. “Come on. Let’s go join everyone on the dance floor.”

“Ummm...Actually, I have to attend another party. Why don’t you come with me? It will be so much more fun. The who’s who of the city will be there,” Natasha coaxed him.

Sameer stared back at her in outrage. “Really? You expect me to walk out of my grandfather’s birthday party to attend one of your events?”

“Why not? You have shown your face here and the party started a long time back. It is well underway. It’s not like you will be missed,” she replied coolly.

Sameer couldn’t believe her. She had always been difficult to please and always wanted things her way. But this was just a bit too much. He was already on the edge tonight after meeting Raashi and Natasha’s behavior was annoying the hell out of him. He swiveled around to glance over at Raashi who was now dancing with his grandfather and wondered what he was doing stuck here with Natasha. What had he been thinking inviting her here? She was too needy and clingy and the type who would destroy his peace of mind with her constant demands and difficult attitude. He had forgotten this part of her.

He should have been there on the floor, dancing and celebrating this important night with Raashi who loved his grandfather as much as he did. But then being with Raashi had its own complications. It meant that he might lose his heart to her. He would have to open himself to heartbreak again. Losing his peace of mind was way better than heartbreak any day. Hell, yeah. Been there. Done that. Faced the heartbreak. And no, his heart wasn't ready for a serious relationship. Definitely not ready to being a sucker to a beautiful woman's charms again. Particularly not this beautiful hazel eyed woman.

He let his anger go and turned to Natasha. "Stay for a little while more and then I will drive you to wherever you want."

Natasha was pleased with herself. She had been livid to see Sameer's attention focused on Raashi. But now that he had agreed so easily to attend another event with her, she felt that her anger had been premature. After all, it was not like Raashi could compete with her for Sameer's attention. She smiled.

Chapter 7

Sameer's people were hounding her. Raashi felt more irritable than she had felt in days. They kept calling her at the office, had inundated her with emails and somehow having managed to get hold of her personal cell number, were now bothering her daily. Sameer Sehgal was an egotistical, haughty beast. He thought he could sit in his lofty tower and let his people deal with her. No way. Not happening. She wasn't interested in any of his offers. She had told him clearly at Janak's birthday party that she wasn't going to sell the land to him. But did he listen? No! He just set his people after her. God! The arrogance of that man was astounding.

She parked her car in front of her building and walked towards the elevator, seething in anger. Sameer was vying for the property Janak had gifted her. That was her property now and there was no way on earth she was going to sell it to him. She had her own plans for the place and she would make her own dreams come true. For once in her whole life, she had got something without a struggle and she was not just going to let someone sweep in and take it away, especially not Sameer Sehgal.

Running a restaurant business wasn't easy. It was tough work and it wasn't all happy profits. She had rents to manage and staff and inventories and a dozen other things that required money. And finally now in the last five years all her investments were giving returns. She had enough savings in the bank to afford a decent life and a foreign education for her sister. Luxuries, she had to indulge in sparingly, but she could handle that. It was more important to save money for future investments and rainy days than on Gucci and Louis Vuitton. Not that she didn't enjoy the occasional Louis, of course she did, but she knew when to spend and when to save.

She had worked very hard for the success she had achieved. She had risen slowly and surely and made a name for herself. Sameer Sehgal had tons of land available to him and he could do what he wanted with any of those. He wasn't getting hers.

She entered her house and quickly laid out her clothes for the evening. It was a simple, knee length, aqua blue skater dress. She was meeting Rithwik tonight and there was no way she was going to let this land business and Sameer Sehgal ruin her evening.

Rithwik was wonderful and special to her. He cared for her deeply and she was well aware of that. They had a comfort level that was borne out of years of friendship. She hadn't even realized that they had been spending so much time alone together until Keya had pointed it out. It had just happened. With all their other friends busy in their lives they had drifted towards one another. In the past, either Keya or she had gone as his 'last minute' dates whenever he had needed them. It was usual for Keya, she, Rithwik and their other friend Aditya to catch up together often. But now that Keya was married and Aditya out of the country, she caught up alone with Rithwik more often than before. She enjoyed his company thoroughly. He was funny, naughty and an outrageous flirt. He could always cheer her up and she was looking forward to spending time with him today. They were going to a new Pan Asian restaurant she had been dying to try out. It had received great reviews and the food was fantastic, she had heard.

As they found their designated table, Raashi let her eyes wander. The black and red décor was beautiful and the dragons painted on the walls were dazzling. It was a good decision to come here.

She sat quietly watching Rithwik talk about a new product his company had recently launched. Normally, she listened to him with avid interest but today her thoughts were elsewhere. It was really all Sameer's fault that she couldn't get him out of her mind. Every day she was harangued by his people and now that she had told them in no uncertain terms where she stood on the land issue, she wondered what he would do next. She knew Sameer well and she was certain of one thing, Sameer Sehgal never gave up on what he wanted.

Raashi twirled her wine glass absently and realized that both of them had been silent for a while now. She switched her attention back to Rithwik and found him staring into his whiskey glass, running a finger across the rim of his glass continuously. She reached forward and grasped his hand, grabbing his attention.

He looked up at her and she asked, "What are you stressed about?"

"I am fine, Raashi."

"No, you're not. You're obviously worried about something. Talk to me."

Raashi saw him think through something. He then sighed and said, "He wants me to get married."

She dropped his hand, stunned, “Who? Your dad?”

He nodded, “In six months and...”

“And?” Raashi prompted him.

“He has given me a list of girls to choose from and you’re at the top of the list.”

Raashi gasped. “What? Me? Wait, wait, go back and start from the beginning.”

“Well, I am thirty-one and showing no signs of getting married, so my father has given me an ultimatum. Either I get married in six months to a girl of my choice or from the list he’s given me or he drops me as the managing director of Fortuna and changes his will to disinherit me.”

“Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Rithwik said with a sigh.

“But can he do that, I mean, really?”

“Of course, he can. He’s the major shareholder in the company. He can do what he wants.”

“OK, I get that, but why me? He doesn’t know me,” Raashi had never met Varun Bali, Rithwik’s father. She knew of him through Rithwik and through the business magazines that frequently featured articles on him. She had always assumed that they shared a good relationship. But now listening to Rithwik she wasn’t so sure.

Rithwik looked down into his glass again before he spoke up. “That’s the million dollar question isn’t it? He knows we are friends. But my father always has a reason for everything and you being on the top of his list does seem strange.”

Raashi frowned as Rithwik continued, “Anyway, I will have to figure out how serious he is about this marriage ultimatum.”

They remained silent for a while and then Rithwik asked, “Would it be so bad? You and me, I mean. We could make marriage work.”

“Very funny, Rithwik,” As Rithwik continued to eye her seriously, she shook her head. “We are so not having this conversation and this is not a marriage proposal, is it?” She looked at him wide eyed.

“Why? I mean think about it. We would be ideal for each other. We are

friends and we understand each other, plus we care for one another. Unless, you have someone else in your life,” he raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Obviously, I don’t have anyone else in my life.”

“What about Sameer Sehgal?”

Raashi bit her lip. “What about him?”

“Somehow I get the feeling, there is something going on between you and him,” Rithwik stated frankly.

“Meaning?”

“A few months back, Sameer Sehgal made an obvious play for you and I had thought that you were falling for him and then suddenly he disappeared from your life. Now he is back again. I see the way he looks at you. What’s really going on, Raashi?”

Raashi wasn’t surprised with the question. Rithwik had been present at both Sheena and Keya’s weddings and he had obviously seen Sameer with her or around her.

How and what was she to answer now? She didn’t want to lie to him, but then again she couldn’t tell him everything.

Thinking for a few seconds, she said, “The equation between Sameer and me was very complicated back then. It is enough to say that whatever was between us wasn’t meant to be. I guess we wanted different things. And the only reason he is back in my life is because of a piece of land. I own some land that he has set his eyes on. He wants it at any cost and I don’t want to sell it. So, well, there is a great, big battle looming over our heads.”

Rithwik looked thoughtful for a moment, watching her intently. To Raashi it was clear that he didn’t entirely believe her. But mercifully he didn’t press her for details.

Instead, he said, “Okay, now that that’s cleared, what about us?”

“Us? You’re crazy to even suggest an ‘us’.” Raashi was sure she looked as shocked as she felt.

“Can you at least give it a thought? If I have to choose a girl to marry from a list or any girl in six months then I’d rather it be you.”

Raashi didn’t know how to respond. Thankfully, he changed the subject and didn’t bring it up again. The rest of the evening passed by comfortably,

without any further awkwardness.

Raashi unlocked the door to her house and was startled to see the pitch darkness inside. As a rule she never drew the curtains closed. She didn't like to walk in blind and always left the curtains drawn open to let some light in. She stumbled for the light-switch and had almost reached it when all of a sudden all the lights went on in the room and she heard a beloved voice scream, "Surprise!"

"Jiya! What in the world are you doing home?" Raashi squealed with delight at seeing her younger sister.

She rushed forward and enveloped her sister in a tight hug. She stepped back to look at her kid sister. At twenty-one Jiya was sharp, witty and extremely impish. She was full of life and a total riot. Her brown hair was cut short and framed her perfect oval face. At the obvious appraisal happening, Jiya winked at her older sister.

"Hi, big sister!" Jiya said. "I sure as hell surprised you, didn't I?"

"When did you get here?" Raashi asked, leading her to the sofa. They curled up on it, happy to be together.

"About two hours back."

Jiya looked at her from top to toe, "Nice aqua dress! I like it very much. The way you're looking, I am sure you were with one very hot guy. Do tell!" she urged naughtily.

Raashi ignored her comment, asking instead, "Has school closed for the summer then?" Referring to the school where Jiya was studying an advanced degree in Economics, in New York.

"Yes hon! That's why I am here, for a whole two months. Cool, isn't it?"

"Absolutely!" Raashi smiled, "I am so thrilled. You had something to eat?"

"Yeah! I raided the fridge while waiting for you to make an appearance." Jiya said reclining back on the sofa. "So, you haven't answered my question, who were you out with?"

"Rithwik."

Jiya squinted her eyes mischievously. "Ooh! I've always had a crush on him."

Raashi laughed.

“You’re dressed so prettily for Rithwik? Hmm!”

“Jee, come on, he is just a friend!”

“Raashi, it’s high time you got involved with someone, so why not Rithwik? I like him. I think you should date him, maybe marry him, and have his babies?” Jiya raised her eyebrows, grinning at her.

God! Was the universe conspiring to get Rithwik and her to hook up? First Sheena, then Rithwik and now her own sister. No! Raashi couldn’t even in her wildest of imaginations conjure up a picture of Rithwik and her playing happy family, with kids and the works. And the thought of getting intimate with him in any way was well – way too weird. She had never thought of him in that way, he was a friend, a very close friend, that’s all.

She saw that her younger sister still had this dreamy look on her face. Raashi knocked on Jiya’s forehead. “Hello, hello,” Raashi said, “elder sister here,” she pointed to herself. “Younger sister there,” she pointed at Jiya. “I am not taking dating advice from you.”

“Come on! I have been waiting to talk to you about this. Couldn’t do it before. Somehow, talking to your elder sister about her love life doesn’t seem right on face time.”

Raashi fidgeted with the strap of her heeled sandals. She finally kicked both heels off her feet and folded her legs under her, “Ok now, this is not the first conversation we are having upon your return. We should talk about you.”

Her sister ignored her.

“Please, Raashi, you need a man in your life. I know that you’re lonely. And after Sheena and Keya both getting married one after the other, don’t you find the need to settle down too?”

Raashi sighed. She knew her sister well. She was like a buzzing bee once she got stuck on a topic.

“I am not sure, Jee, I do at times envy Sheena and Keya. They are so much in love. As for marriage, it’s a long shot still. I haven’t found the Right Guy yet. I am not going to settle down with just anyone. That would be a compromise. I want – God! I don’t know what I want,” Raashi shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, Raashi, you are no fun. Here I am fantasizing about you and your Mr. Perfect and you have to go and put a dampener on it by being so boring. Anyway, tell me how would your Mr. Right Guy look like?”

“Jee, you’re crazy, not to mention extremely nosy.”

“No, seriously, I want to know.”

Jiya folded her hands on her chest, tapping her fingers on her arms, waiting for her to reply.

“OK! Six feet tall, golden skin, chocolate brown eyes and dark ruffled hair. There, are you happy now?” Raashi replied blandly.

“Very,” Jiya said and then smirking slightly she asked again, “Sorry, but I have to ask. Does he exist?”

“That’s it, Jiya. No more interrogation. Now can we get back to something more serious?”

Jiya stuck her tongue out at her, mischievously.

“Tell me, what are you planning to do in the next two months here, other than sleep, eat and party?” Raashi asked her sister.

“Actually, you listed everything on the agenda,” Jiya winked at her again cheekily.

“Well, then I have a proposition for you. Why don’t you work with me for the time you are here? My assistant is hoping for a long deserved break that I have avoided giving her for a while, so if you agree to step in, I can let her go off for a while.”

“Work with you? As your assistant? No way! I am not crazy. I know you well enough to see through your plan. You’ll run me from pillar to post making sure I am too exhausted to do what’s actually on my list for these two months. Sorry, but no!”

“Come on, Jee! It won’t be that bad, I promise you. Besides, up until now you have shown no interest whatsoever in our business. It is yours also, you know.”

“I do know that, Raashi. But this business was never my cup of tea. It’s yours. It’s in your blood. You love it. I don’t.”

“All the same, unless you don’t see firsthand how things are run, how do you know whether you like it or not? I insist Jiya. You have to try it out this

time and I am not taking NO for an answer,” Raashi stood up, clearly indicating that the conversation was over.

“OK! But please don’t make me regret coming back to spend time home,” Jiya complained.

“I won’t. Promise!” Raashi said, leaning forward to tweak her sister’s nose and planting an affectionate kiss on her cheek.

Chapter 8

Sameer grimaced after listening to this latest report. He was sitting in the conference room with his team and no one had anything positive to report. He had put up a team of his best people together to tackle the property issue with Raashi. For starters, he had wanted to find out what exactly she had in mind for the land. Then he wanted his team to try and acquire it from her by offering her an obscene amount of money that was far more than the original price of the land. But, so far, a week had passed and his team hadn't reached anywhere. After the first few tries they couldn't even get past her assistant and after that the only time they had managed to speak to her was when Sameer had himself provided them with her cell number. However, that had been the wrong thing to do. It had annoyed her even more and she had asked his business manager to 'Buzz Off' after his third call to her.

Apparently, she didn't want to sell the land ever and as he had rightly guessed she was never going to sell the land, especially to him. She had conveyed her message to his business manager in pretty clear and strong terms before asking him to 'Buzz Off'.

Sameer smiled to himself. He knew he was left with no other option. He would have to approach her himself. Like there ever was any other option, he admitted to himself. He had to face the lioness in her den and that was the only way forward.

Raashi rubbed her tired eyes. She was having a tough day with the staff at one of her restaurants. She had missed lunch, surviving on coffee since breakfast and now this inventory report. The numbers were swimming in front of her eyes.

The silver lining to the otherwise challenging day was that the phone calls from Sameer's office had stopped. Last week every second call she had received was from his office. If she got one more call from Sameer's people to discuss the land issue, she would injure something or someone and that someone ought to be Sameer. But it looked like they had finally backed off, which was a good sign.

The phone on her desk buzzed.

"Yes, Jiya, what is it?" Raashi said impatiently into the phone. She had

specifically asked Jiya not to disturb her for the next hour in order to catch up with her workload. Instead, this was the third time Jiya was calling in ten minutes.

“Uh Raashi...”

“I often wonder if you deliberately ignore my instructions, just to rile me up for assigning you as my assistant. Do you want to prove to me that it was a bad idea? Because right now I am sure it was indeed a very BAD idea.”

“Raashi...” Jiya whispered into the phone.

“And why are you whispering?” Raashi asked getting more agitated by the second.

“You know that dream guy you described to me the other night, six feet tall, golden skin, chocolate brown eyes, ruffled dark brown hair. He is out here, waiting to meet you.”

Raashi felt dizzy for a moment. There was only one guy in the whole world she knew that fit that description to the tee. With great difficulty she managed to finally get the words out of her mouth.

“Sameer Sehgal,” Raashi said softly.

“You actually know him!” Jiya remarked, stunned.

“Not now, Jiya. Tell him I am busy.”

“I did and he’s not listening.”

“Then tell him again and this time mean it!” Raashi disconnected the line and rubbed her eyes wearily.

Damn, damn and damn, she thought to herself. After complete silence from his office for more than a week, she had begun to believe he had let it go. But she should have known better than to believe that Sameer would back off so easily. She knew what he was like. He was relentless in the pursuit of something he wanted. Case in point his successful seduction of her. He saw her, he wanted her and he had seduced her. She mentally gave herself a shake, cursing herself for letting her thoughts go there. She was not thinking of that right now.

She was way too mentally tired to face him and she just wished he would get the message and go away. But her wishes weren’t coming true today as the next moment the door opened and Sameer coolly walked in, with Jiya following reluctantly behind, her hands raised up.

“I’m sorry, Raashi. He just won’t...”

“Take no for an answer,” Raashi completed for her. “Don’t worry, that’s so typical! Thanks Jiya. I’ll take it from here.”

Sameer turned around to look at Jiya. She was cute with dark hair and naughty, dancing eyes. He smiled at her, “You are her sister, right?”

Raashi could see that her kid sister looked fascinated and spellbound. She heard her say, “I sure am.”

“No wonder you looked familiar. By the way, what are you doing working for Raashi? I thought you were studying in New York?”

Raashi saw Jiya give her a pointed look that most definitely meant - I need an explanation on how this hot guy knows so much about me.

Then Jiya turned to Sameer and gave him a charming smile as she replied, “Yes, Economics. I have a semester break actually.”

“Wow and you agreed to work with your sister on your holiday? That’s awesome. Wish my sisters could be more responsible,” Sameer told her.

“You have sisters? How many?” Jiya asked him.

Raashi folded her hands angrily in front of her. Her sister had no boundaries. None whatsoever. She was interacting with Sameer, who was a perfect stranger to her, like she had known him for a long time.

“I have two sisters. They’re twins and about your age. But they’d never agree to work for me and definitely not on their holiday,” Sameer told Jiya.

This was all Raashi needed. Sameer had walked into her office without any prior intimation and was now inciting Jiya to rebel against her. Jiya was not happy working for her and Raashi saw her raise her hands in the air and say dramatically, “Heard that, big sis? No one works during holidays. And how many times do I need to explain to you that this is not my cuppa...”

Raashi glared angrily at her sister, disliking her boldness in front of Sameer.

Seeing her expression, Jiya changed tactics, “Anyway, since Raashi was shorthanded, with her assistant out for a few days, I decided to pitch in.”

Raashi sat speechless and shocked as Jiya gave him a naughty wink. “By the way, you are way too pushy for your own good.”

“Usually works for me,” Sameer said smoothly.

Raashi was thoroughly annoyed now. “Well, if you’ve finished with the small talk Jiya, I am sure you have a lot of work to do.”

Jiya flashed her a defiant look and left, shutting the door behind her.

“My, aren’t we in a swell mood today,” Sameer stated, coming to stand in front of her desk.

Raashi leaned back into her chair and looked up at him, trying desperately to calm the rapid beating of her heart. He looked great as always. He was dressed in a blue suit with another one of his signature white shirts with a red patterned tie. As usual his hair was ruffled and Raashi clenched her fists tight, resisting the suddenly strong urge to run her hand through his tousled hair.

Sameer casually folded his arms in front of him. “Like what you see?” he inquired, cockily tilting his head to one side.

Ignoring his remark, Raashi asked, “What do you want, Sameer?”

“I want my land back,” he said flatly.

She raised a brow slowly, haughtily. “For starters, Janak gifted that land to me, so it’s mine. I think I made my position to you and your minions very clear. I am not selling.”

“That’s my land and grandfather should not have given it to you in the first place.”

“Well, that’s just too bad then. Because he did give me the land and now it’s mine,” Raashi retaliated coldly. She couldn’t see the point of this conversation.

“Name your price,” Sameer stated coldly.

“Excuse me?”

Sameer placed his hands on the table, towering over her, “You heard me, Raashi. Everyone has a price. Name yours and let’s get this over with.”

Raashi couldn’t believe the gall of this man. Hadn’t she made it abundantly clear to him that she wasn’t selling the land? Yet here he was standing with a devil may care attitude forcing his hand when he was well aware of her stance on the situation.

She saw him straighten as she stood up to face him.

“Go to hell, Sameer!”

Sameer folded his hands back. “Ah, now I get what this is about. You’ve

just found a convenient way to wreak your vengeance on me for my indiscretion concerning you, isn't it?"

The silence that followed his statement was deafening even to him. She was angry and he knew that. He watched how the torrent of emotions crossed her face, how she flipped an irate hand through her silky soft hair pushing them back from her face, saw how her chest rose and fell angrily. He could see how the cream silk shirt she was wearing hugged her curves. He was enjoying her discomfiture. He wanted her perturbed. He hated her calm and cold façade when he was around her. He waited with bated breath for her to reply because Raashi wasn't the type to simmer in silence.

Raashi was fuming now. She couldn't believe him. He was deliberately provoking her.

She walked around her desk, stood in front of him and said firmly, "Get Out! This discussion is over."

"Ah! You don't like the truth, do you?"

"I said. Get. Out."

But Sameer wasn't through with her yet.

"Tell me, Raashi, how does it feel having the upper hand? Knowing that you have something that I so desperately want. Knowing that you're just doing this to exact a fitting revenge from me."

Her eyes flared in anger. "You know of all the things that I regret the most in life, that night being almost at the top of the list, what I regret even more is meeting a bastard like you."

He was so damn full of himself and egoistic that right now she wanted nothing more than to slap that smirk that was beginning to form on his face.

"No, Raashi, you are wrong," Sameer said. His jaw hardened as he took a step towards her. "There's always something that you're going to regret even more."

And in the next instant he hauled her in his arms and kissed her.

Oh, God, No! Raashi thought when Sameer's lips descended on her own. This couldn't be happening. While her mind was instructing her to push him away, hit him or do any number of things to end the kiss, her body was betraying her mind by giving her completely different signals.

She had expected the kiss to be violent and controlling, but instead,

Sameer's lips were gently molding her own, pecking on her lower lip, sucking her soft upper lip, very softly and subtly coaxing her to respond to him and God help her, she was helpless to resist him and the teasing demands of his lips.

He was right, she told herself a second before she responded, she would regret this even more, but right now she wanted it, she wanted this kiss like her life depended on it. She wound her arms around his neck, pushing herself more intimately against his body and kissed him back. She opened her mouth to his tender assault and let him invade her mouth, let his tongue tangle with hers. She caught his tongue with her own and caressed it.

Sameer thought he was going mad. There was so much blood rushing to his head that he couldn't think. What had started with the intention of showing her that he was in control was rapidly spiraling into a situation over which he had absolutely no control. None whatsoever. At this moment, all he was aware of was the feel of Raashi in his arms. Her body pressed flush against his, her breasts straining against his chest, her lips and tongue dancing with his. He wanted nothing more than to lift her and lay her down on her neatly organized desk and bury himself deep inside her lush body.

He kissed her possessively, deeply, stealing her breath. She wasn't sure how she was able to breathe. All she knew was that she was depending on him for it. She ran her hands through his hair, thrilled to be doing the one thing she had been itching to do since he had walked into her office. She moaned when he moved his lips from her mouth to the side of her neck and kissed her there, inching his mouth lower down her throat and down the exposed part of her neck.

She lifted his head and brought his mouth back onto hers, kissing him fervently, sinking into the heat of his mouth, thrilled when he kissed her back with heated intensity. A joy so profound was invading her thoughts that she wanted nothing more but for this crazy moment to go on, to let this kiss come to its obvious conclusion, to let him...

"Oh, My God!" Raashi heard Jiya remark from the door. And then, "I knocked, I swear I did."

They sprang apart, their eyes on each other. He saw her brush a stray strand of hair away from her face. He looked at her swollen lips and narrowed his eyes, "This isn't over!"

And then he walked off, leaving her to wonder whether he was talking about their discussion or the undeniable passion that had flared between the two of them.

“And what was that about?” Jiya asked a moment later, wide eyed with curiosity.

“Not now, Jiya,” Raashi snapped back angrily.

But Jiya was unperturbed. “That’s the second time in an hour that you’ve brushed me off. You have to talk to me about what happened just now. I saw the two of you kissing.” Jiya shook her head. “Scratch that. You weren’t just kissing him, Raashi, you were devouring him.”

Raashi remained silent. She had to talk to her sister. She couldn’t tell her the entire truth though. Jiya was her younger sister and what sort of example would she be setting for her if she told her about her one-night stand with Sameer. But she couldn’t keep quiet, she had to tell her something.

“Sameer Sehgal is Janak’s grandson, Sheena’s cousin.”

“Oh! Right! Now I know why his name sounded familiar. But why was he so insistent on seeing you?” Jiya asked sitting on Raashi’s desk, placing the papers she was holding in her hands next to her.

Raashi looked down for a moment before speaking. “Janak gifted me a piece of land on Marine Drive without Sameer’s knowledge and now Sameer wants it back. He is trying to buy it back from me. He is ready to pay any price for it.”

“You get a prime piece of land in Mumbai as a gift and now someone is willing to pay any price you name for it and you don’t want to sell, because?”

“Because the land is perfect. It has this beautiful heritage villa that can be converted to a wonderful vintage style restaurant. I am going to make it one of the best in the country. I want to work towards making it a Michelin star restaurant,” Raashi said.

“But you can build it anywhere. Why in God’s name is that land so important for you?” Jiya asked, getting quickly to the crux of the problem.

“Because that quaint villa is beautiful and in a perfect location. Grandmother would have loved it. I know she would have.”

“I don’t know, Raashi. It’s not making sense to me. But it’s your dream, and if it’s so important for you, I am going to go with you on this.”

“Thanks Jee,” Raashi said, smiling fondly at her sister.

“Which brings me back to the most important question, what has all this land business got to do with Sameer and you kissing each other so passionately?”

“Oh! That was nothing,” Raashi said trying to make light of the kiss.

“Raashi Deewan, I know a scorcher when I see one and that kiss was like a hundred on the heat factor. So don’t you dare brush it off lightly.”

“OK! You’re being really pushy yourself, Jee.”

Jiya gave her a pointed look.

“Sameer and I have a history, we were attracted to each other some time back and...and...it didn’t work out or you can say we didn’t see eye to eye on certain things. In retrospect, I think it was for the better that it didn’t work out because we want different things in life and it wouldn’t have worked out in any case.”

“Hmm, that explains how he knew about me.” Jiya then pouted mischievously and asked sweetly, “So you were kissing now because you hate each other?”

“That was a moment of utter insanity. One moment we were fighting, at each other’s throats and the next...well you saw the next. Nevertheless, it’s not going to happen again. I am going to make sure of it,” Raashi said convincing herself that there wouldn’t be a repeat.

“So you don’t feel a thing for him? It was just, what did you say, ‘insanity’?”

“I don’t feel anything for him,” Raashi said forcefully, looking away.

“Then you wouldn’t mind in the least, if I made a play for him?” Jiya asked tongue in cheek.

“Absolutely not. No way. You can’t be serious,” Raashi said frantically, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Why not? He’s gorgeous.”

“That he is, Jee, but he is older to you and you know nothing about him. Moreover, he is seeing someone else these days.”

“And kissing you on the side when he gets the chance. Hmm...I am not sure he’s the one for me then. I’m big on fidelity and trust. Never mind,” Jiya

said shaking her head.

Raashi breathed a sigh of relief. Once Jiya made up her mind, it was very difficult to budge her sister from her stance. More importantly, Raashi somehow couldn't stand the thought of her own kid sister flirting with Sameer Sehgal.

"I guess he's going to be back, right?" Jiya asked.

"You bet. I've a fight on my hands, Sameer Sehgal always plays to win and I on the other hand, am unwilling to lose," Raashi replied.

"Just be sure that in this war of both your wills, you don't end up losing more than the land," Jiya said astutely. She started to walk off and paused at the door, "HR has just sent some papers. You need to sign those ASAP."

Raashi nodded and breathed a sigh of relief as her younger sister went back to her desk. She sat back on her chair and put her face in her hands. God! What had she been thinking? She had let Sameer Sehgal kiss her, again. She was so foolish. She dreaded to think where that kiss would have led if Jiya hadn't walked in on them. Why was it that she couldn't resist him? In spite of all that had occurred between them she still couldn't contain her body's reaction to him.

She knew he wouldn't leave her alone and she needed to be sure of what she was going to do when he called again. She had to get some answers out of him regarding the land and she had to clear her mind and school herself not to react to him. Well, for the first part she knew just the right person to talk to, but for the latter she had no one but herself to rely on. She had to ensure that there never was a repeat of what had just transpired in her office.

Chapter 9

“Hello Raashi,” Janak Sehgal stood up from his desk and moved forward to greet Raashi as she walked into his office. He gave her a hug and kissed both her cheeks. “How are you, my darling girl?”

Raashi smiled at the old man who had been her backbone through several trials in her life.

“I am fine. I have just been busy at work as usual.”

Raashi had decided to come and visit Janak first thing in the morning. He was the only one who could give her an insight into Sameer’s plans, without actually prying. And maybe even get Sameer to back off.

Janak leaned against his desk as Raashi lowered herself into the chair in front of him.

“I think you’re working way too hard these days. You need to go out more, have fun!”

Raashi raised a brow, “God! Not you too. Jiya says I am a workaholic and a bore. She has been repeating the same thing every single day ever since she has returned.”

“Oh! Jiya’s in town. I didn’t know that,” Janak said.

“She just got in last week. Didn’t she call you?”

“That girl is too restless for her own good. She spoke to me for fifteen minutes, talking nineteen to the dozen and never once mentioned that she was in town,” Janak shook his head. “Anyway, you tell me what’s bothering you?”

Raashi sighed deeply and leaned forward, “You somehow always know when something is bothering me, don’t you?”

Janak smiled at her affectionately waiting for her to speak.

“I want to know what Sameer wants with my land and what it will take for him to leave me alone?”

Just as Janak opened his mouth to reply, there was a knock at his door and before Raashi could as much as blink, Sameer walked in.

He momentarily froze as he laid eyes on her. Seeing her here was an

unexpected surprise. A very pleasant surprise indeed, especially considering the way he couldn't stop grinning. She sure was a sight for sore eyes.

He looked her over. He liked that she wore her clothes with such a confident grace. She was dressed formally today in a short pin striped black skirt and a dark red shirt with black pointed heels. From where she was seated, legs crossed primly, facing his grandfather, he could make out her long shapely legs. He had a momentary flash of those legs wrapped around him as he had moved inside her. He inhaled deeply, clearing his head of the vision and walked towards them.

"Good morning," Sameer said. His eyes moved from Raashi to his grandfather and then back to Raashi.

Raashi couldn't bring herself to look away from him. He was one of the few men she knew, who filled a suit just perfectly and today his charcoal grey suit looked like it had been stitched to his body. She had always been a sucker for men in suits. Correction, she was a sucker for Sameer in a suit. No, she was an idiot - that's what she was to even think that. She cursed herself mentally.

His dark eyes met hers and held them.

Try as much as he could, Sameer couldn't bring himself to look away from her. He remembered how she felt in his arms, warm and soft, her mouth crushed under his, her hand weaving through his hair. And looking at her staring right back at him, he knew that no matter how hard she denied it, he made her emotions stir. From the far corners of his mind he heard someone call out to him. Raashi looked away instantly. Sameer turned to look at his grandfather, who was standing beside him now.

"Hi, Sameer!"

"Hello, Grandfather!"

"So both of you decided to give an old man some attention today," Janak put his hands in his trouser pockets.

"Grandfather, you have my attention always."

"So, does that mean you are not upset with me anymore for gifting the land that you covet so much to Raashi?" Janak queried, knowing that Sameer had been upset with him.

Sameer turned to look at Raashi who he saw was watching him carefully.

“There is nothing to be upset about. You did what you had to,” Sameer told his grandfather.

“If that’s the case then why did you leave so early from my birthday party?” Janak asked gently.

Sameer’s eyes widened. He never thought that leaving early with Natasha that night would cause his grandfather to think that he was upset with him. That was not his intention. He never wanted to hurt him in any way.

“I am sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I am not angry with you at all. I just left that night because Natasha had to be somewhere else and she insisted that I join her. Forgive me for making you think otherwise.”

Janak smiled.

Raashi had wondered why he had left the party so suddenly. It was not like him to skip such a major event in his grandfather’s life. She knew how fond he was of Janak. But then perhaps Natasha was important to him as well. God! Natasha! She had to remember that Sameer was with her. She hated herself for kissing him, for forgetting that he was dating someone else.

“It’s alright,” she heard Janak say. “But I hope that I have not started a war between you two because of this land,” he said, looking from Sameer to Raashi.

“Don’t worry. Raashi and I will work something out, won’t we Raashi?” Sameer asked her pointedly.

Raashi looked up into his eyes and caught the challenge in it. They were at a deadlock in this situation and he knew that, but he still insisted on inciting her. She didn’t want to work anything out with him. She didn’t even want to be in the same room with him after the way she had responded to his kiss yesterday. She had sought Janak out because she wanted his help to figure out this issue between Sameer and her. She didn’t want to interact with Sameer by herself any more.

But before she could form an appropriate reply to Sameer’s question, Janak said, “Raashi, you need to talk to him. Will you do that for me please?”

“Hmm,” Raashi replied.

Taking that as her acceptance, Janak continued, “Good. You two are both important to me and I want both of you to be happy. So, for my sake please work it out.” Janak checked his watch for the time before continuing.

“Anyway, I have a meeting to get to and since both of you are here, can you please talk and clear it all out?” Without waiting for their reply, he walked out, leaving the two of them alone.

Raashi stood up to leave the minute Janak left, but before she could take a step forward, she heard Sameer say, “Running away? I thought you just agreed to talk to me.”

“Firstly, I am not running away from you, I am staying away from you. Huge difference. And secondly, I didn’t agree to take part in any kind of discussion at all. Definitely not right now,” Raashi said and took a step forward.

Sameer took a step to his right and blocked her. It brought her in closer contact to him. She was so close to him that she had to look up to talk to him. Raashi hated the way he was always towering over her.

“We are not finished,” Sameer said.

Raashi looked up at him, refusing to back away, refusing to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he was making her feel flustered. “We were finished long back. Stop this nonsense and let me go.”

“We need to talk Raashi, whether you like it or not. So, if not now, choose a time and place. I will call you or come to your office or your house every day, whatever it takes till you agree to a meeting.”

Raashi stiffened. “Are you threatening me?” she asked, crossing her arms on her chest.

Sameer leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Not threatening you, beautiful, just warning you. You will find me at your door step, morning, evening and night till you don’t agree to talk to me.”

Raashi shut her eyes for a second, desperately trying to stand stock still, controlling her body’s reaction to him. He was so near, whispering in her ear.

She schooled her thoughts and her expression. She gave him a slight push that made him move away from her. She then took two steps forward, turned around and said as calmly as she could, “Tomorrow at one.”

Sameer felt victorious. “I’ll come by to your office,” he told her.

Round one to me, he thought as he watched her walk out, her hips swaying and her soft hair flowing behind her. The woman had a body made for sin. God! He was spending way too much time thinking about her.

Yesterday, the entire day had gone by and Sameer hadn't been able to get any substantial work done. She haunted his thoughts. He remembered her scent, her softness, her warmth and how she fit into him so perfectly. Damn! He wanted Raashi. His body craved for hers and even though he was aware that she really didn't like him very much, her body still responded to the call of his. She had been an equal and willing participant in the kiss they had shared yesterday. The ring of his cell phone brought him out of his daydream. He saw that it was Natasha calling.

It was ironic, he thought. He was not the least bit attracted to the woman he was considering to spend the rest of his life with and the woman he craved for was a bad bet for his heart. Perhaps therein lay the answer to his dilemma. Natasha was most definitely not a threat to his heart. But Raashi, with her sharp tongue, razor wit and gorgeous body would be challenging him at every turn. She would want his complete surrender, heart and soul. He was indeed better off without her. He should have never kissed her again. Big mistake, big bad mistake. Convincing himself of that, Sameer answered Natatsha's call.

Chapter 10

Raashi paced the floor of her office as she frantically ran her hands through her hair again. Why had she agreed to meet up with him? She should have put her foot down and refused to have anything more to do with him. But instead here she was, waiting for him, looking at her watch every few seconds. He was late and this feeling of being on the edge was annoying her. Her cell buzzed and she saw it was Sameer.

“You’re late,” she said.

“Oh! Am I?” Sameer looked at his watch. “Sorry! Five minutes only.”

“Where are you?”

“Come on down, I am waiting in the car for you.”

“For what?”

“For our meeting, remember?” Sameer replied.

“You’re wasting my time, Sameer, please do not speak in riddles,” Raashi retorted.

“Have you had lunch?” he asked.

“No, but what has that got to do with anything?” Raashi countered, irritably shifting the papers on her desk.

“Come on, Raashi! Don’t lose your cool already. You’ll have ample opportunity to get angry with me at lunch.”

“Sameer, I agreed to have a meeting with you, not to have lunch,” Raashi stated, shifting her cell phone to her other ear.

“Come on! I’m hungry and you’ve not eaten too. Let’s have lunch some place and discuss the land issue. This way we solve two problems in one go.”

Raashi kept silent. It was typical of him to maneuver a situation to his convenience. She took a deep calming breath. “I don’t appreciate being manipulated.”

“Point taken. Are you coming or not?”

She was exasperated with him but she needed to resolve this issue once and for all. “Be down in five,” she said and cut the call.

It was best to get this over with, she thought. She had to get Sameer off

her back. If the only way to do that was to have lunch with him then so be it. This was her opportunity to convey to him her exact feelings regarding his offer on the land. She was not going to be a coward about it. She'd face him head on.

Sameer waited for Raashi in his car. He had deliberately cajoled her into lunch. He wanted to meet her on neutral ground. Here in her office, on her own terrain, she would obviously have an upper hand and most likely she wouldn't be willing to listen to anything he said. He wanted to catch her off guard and this seemed to be the best way to do that.

He watched her descend the stairs and walk towards his car. Her cream shift dress ended at her knees and fitted her just perfectly. Damn those gorgeous legs. They made his breath catch each and every time. She shifted her head to cross the road and her flowing hair swung with the movement. She looked simple yet elegant.

Raashi got into Sameer's Mercedes and put on her seat belt all the while ignoring him. When she turned to look at him, she caught him staring. She narrowed her eyes but kept quiet.

"Hello!" he said.

"I'm here. So what's the next trick you have up your sleeve?" she asked.

Sameer tilted his head to a side. She really did not trust him at all.

He grinned, "Nothing, I swear! It is only lunch. No more tricks!"

"Fine! Let's get it over with then," Raashi said rudely as Sameer pulled off.

Within moments he got a phone call and he plugged on his hand free. He was quickly engrossed in the call. Raashi was thankful she didn't have to indulge in any routine talk with him. It would have been ridiculous. After all, she couldn't possibly discuss weather patterns with him.

From whatever she could hear at her end, she realized he was talking to one of his managers in Europe. He seemed to be in complete command, giving instructions carefully and listening keenly. He was extremely capable and she knew that he had a high sense of responsibility towards his work. She observed him while he spoke, his hands strong on the steering wheel. His light blue shirt worn over black trousers was folded at his forearms and his black and blue striped, silk tie was loosened casually at his throat. On his

nose was perched a dark pair of sunglasses. She was so lost in checking him out that she didn't realize he had finished talking on his phone.

They were at a signal when Sameer turned and caught her watching him. He returned her stare and she could feel his gaze burning right through her. A horn sounded loudly and Raashi came back to reality with a jolt. Embarrassed, she turned to look outside the window.

Sameer too turned to find the signal green. He was blocking the traffic. Smoothly, he moved the car ahead and continued driving in silence.

Raashi had expected him to take her to some ritzy restaurant in one of his own hotels for lunch, but instead she was pleasantly surprised when he took her to a small seaside café.

He led her to a corner table. She looked around at the intimately placed tables, the huge umbrellas shading each table and the sea rumbling in the distance. "It's certainly not what I expected," she said looking intently at him. "I didn't think you would ever come to a place like this."

Sameer took off his sunglasses and placed them on the table in front of him, "I am sure it's not what you're used to but..."

"And how would you know what I am used to or not," Raashi interrupted him coldly. "You know nothing about me."

Sameer pinned her with a look that roved her face, stayed on her lips and then down to her chest and then back up to her lips. Finally, he looked into her eyes.

"I agree. There is a lot I don't know about you. But then again there is a lot that only I will ever know of." The last bit, he added indelicately and recklessly. It was a cruel thing to say, considering he had been the first one to know her in the most intimate way possible. He was human after all and her constant anger and rudeness was aggravating him.

Raashi felt the color rise to her cheeks, as she understood the implication in his words. She got up to leave. "I should never have agreed to come. You're despicable!"

Sameer caught her wrist as she stood up and held tight when she tried to pull away. He shouldn't have said that to her. It was uncalled for and he knew he should apologize.

"Look, Raashi. I am sorry! Really, I shouldn't have said that. Please can

we call a truce right now, for this afternoon? What is essential right now is to talk about the land. So please stay.”

Raashi looked at him without a word. He was right. They needed to discuss things in a calm and collected way. They wouldn’t get anywhere if they started a war of words. She resumed her seat. “OK. A truce it is then.”

“Great! I hope you like the food here, it’s super.”

They ordered their food, vegetable pasta for Raashi and a club sandwich for Sameer. As he had predicted, the food was indeed delicious and Raashi dug into it with gusto.

“This is delicious. I’m really surprised, Sameer. You own some of the best restaurants in the finest hotels in the country and here you are at a sea side café in a corner of Mumbai eating simple food like a regular person.”

Sameer shrugged his shoulders. “It’s not a big deal for me. I like trying out new places. As long as the food is good and the place is hygienic, it works for me.”

At the end of the meal Sameer pushed his plate aside. “I always work better after a good meal. Shall we get back to business?”

“By all means,” Raashi replied, wiping her mouth with a paper napkin.

“Let’s lay all our cards on the table. You have my land...”

“Just to be clear, it’s mine now, so can we at least get the facts straight?”

He put his hands up in defense. “Alright. I’ll start again. Since a long time I have been planning to extend The Marquis and build a spa resort in its new wing. I want to make a magnificent city spa, a resort, right in the middle of Mumbai that would be an ideal place for unwinding and de-stressing. Yoga, massages, whirlpools and all sorts of therapy programs, organic restaurants, vegan food and the works will be on the offer. I want to create an environment of indoor and outdoor treatment rooms. Lush greenery, tropical flowers, I want to make an oasis of leisure and luxury in the middle of this city. I want to make The Marquis one of the most sought after hotels in this country.”

Raashi watched him keenly as he spoke of his dream project. He was painting a picture of the spa with words and she could clearly visualize it in her mind’s eye.

When he finished, she said, “That’s fantastic, Sameer. But I don’t

understand what all this has got to do with me.”

“I wanted to use my grandmother’s heritage villa and the land around it to build my dream project. It’s adjacent to The Marquis and I can easily extend a wing there. This is my dream project, Raashi and that’s why I want that land back.”

Raashi could see that he was really passionate about this venture. It was his dream, but she had one too.

“Two months ago, I met Janak for lunch at The Marquis. While driving back together after our lunch, we crossed the villa. He stopped to show it to me. I never even knew he owned it. But as I wandered through it, I fell in love with it. I know it’s dilapidated and old but I could see it had so much potential. I could totally visualize it. Imagine its walls restored. That huge ceiling lit up with antique brass and crystal chandeliers. Old antique print dark wallpaper on its walls, Victorian tables and chairs dotted around it. Those beautiful arches painted and those lovely baroque pillars restored. I was blown away. That place could be fabulous. It could be made into a world-class restaurant. Janak noticed that I was spellbound and asked me what was going on in my mind. I explained my vision to him and told him the villa had so much potential and it shouldn’t lay there in ruins unutilized. A few days later he called me. He talked to me in detail about my vision for the villa again and the land around it. The next thing I know he gifted it to me. Just like that. I argued with him, but he absolutely refused to accept the land back. He wanted me to fulfill my vision. To make it a reality.” She looked at him and then shook her head in a soft no. “I am sorry, but I just can’t sell it.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Sameer argued. “Because the way I see it, you can build this restaurant of yours anywhere. Yet, you won’t, because it’s me asking to buy it back from you. You are punishing me.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say.” Raashi was visibly aghast.

“If that’s not the truth then why won’t you sell? I am offering you whatever you ask for it,” Sameer countered.

“The place that I envisaged, that restaurant, was my grandmother’s vision. My parents died in a car crash when I was ten, Jiya four. My grandmother looked after us. It’s because of her that I am who I am today. She wanted to one day own a beautiful classical restaurant. She had never traveled anywhere, but had seen pictures of wonderful Parisian, vintage style

restaurants in magazines and she had shown them to me. What I described to you right now was her dream. She wanted to build this vintage restaurant in an old restored property. She died leaving her dream unfulfilled and I am going to make that dream come true for her.”

Sameer leaned back in his chair watching her. Of all the reasons that had come to his mind for Raashi not wanting to sell the land, he had never in his wildest imagination ever thought that she would be so passionate about fulfilling her grandmother’s dream.

When he did not respond, Raashi reiterated. “I am serious about this.”

“I can see that.”

“So you understand and you won’t bother me anymore?” Raashi asked.

“All I understand is that we are at crossroads. It’s your dream versus mine and like you, I am not willing to give up,” Sameer replied.

“I knew this would be a waste of time. You just don’t get it, do you?” Raashi retorted angrily.

“I need to think about this, Raashi,” Sameer said slowly. When she didn’t say anything, he said, “Give me some time. I’ll get back to you.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts when all of a sudden Sameer sat up straight, “Well? You up for some dessert?” he asked changing the subject.

He saw the confused look on her face. “They taste as good as they look. You wanna try something?” He pointed to the colorful array of sweet delights on display.

“Sure,” Raashi shrugged. At least he wasn’t pressing her. She knew he could be very persistent. He needed time and hopefully, once he had thought about her reasons he wouldn’t trouble her again. Besides, she wasn’t one to say no to desserts and the café did have an amazing selection.

Sameer watched as Raashi chose a dessert from the vast selection. She turned to ask if he wanted something too, but he refused. She raised her eyebrows questioningly and he shook his head once again.

Raashi took a bite of the cheese-cake and shut her eyes, “Umm. Divine!” She opened her eyes to see Sameer watching her with amusement. “What?” she asked.

“I’ve never seen a woman enjoy dessert as much as you. Most women I

know would never even opt for dessert. Everyone I know is just too obsessed with their weight these days.”

“Well, Mr. Sehgal, what can I say, you have been cavorting with the wrong women. Here try some of this. It’s blissful.”

She dug her spoon into the dessert and offered it to him. Sameer leaned closer. Raashi hesitated for a second but then brought the spoon forward letting him take the bite.

She smiled as his eyes widened in appreciation. He grabbed her spoon and dug in. Soon, they were fighting over who was being greedy and eating more than the other. Sameer scooped the last bite on to his spoon before Raashi could. She made a face at him and complained. He brought the spoon near her mouth but then mischievously moved the spoon away from her towards himself. But to his bad luck, his hand accidentally knocked down his glass of water. The water spilled on the table and the spoon fell on his shirt.

Raashi took in the entire scene and burst out laughing. Sameer grabbed some paper napkins and controlled the water spill before cleaning the mess off his shirt. He looked at Raashi and scowled. “Glad I could provide some entertainment for you! That’s the second time my clothes have been messed up, thanks to you.”

“Oh! You deserved what you got and for the record, this time it wasn’t my fault at all,” Raashi said, collapsing into fits of laughter.

Sameer looked at her laughing and couldn’t tear his eyes away from her. It was satisfying seeing her laugh. She was beautiful. Lately, every time he had seen her, she had been on edge, always serious, her laughter rare. Now, looking at her laughing, he caught a glimpse of the girl he had once known. Suddenly, it hit him like a bolt of lightning. He wanted to see that joy on her face always and he wanted to be the one to put it there. If letting go of his own dream meant letting her have hers then he would do that, if only to see her happy.

No! What was he thinking? He needed to get away from Raashi and stay away from her. Since when had he become so sentimental? One lunch with her and he was already waving goodbye to his own dreams. He stood up abruptly and said, “Let’s go.”

Raashi watched him walk away, baffled by the change in his mood. She got up slowly and followed him to the car.

On reaching her office, Raashi couldn't remember what exactly had brought the change in him. One minute he was fooling around and the next he was so silent, so pensive. They had driven back in complete silence and when they had reached her office she had got only a curt, "you'll be hearing from me soon" and he had sped off. What had happened? Oh Well! Sameer could behave as he liked. As far as she was concerned, as long as he left her alone, she couldn't care less.

Chapter 11

The doorbell pealed incessantly.

“God! Who is making such a ruckus?” Raashi said, as she hurried to the door. She peeped through the eyehole and smiled. Of course, it had to be these two.

She opened the door and greeted Sheena and Keya warmly.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” she said as each of them hugged her in turn and walked in.

Sheena and Keya began chatting away non-stop as soon as they entered her house. By default they went straight to her room and jumped onto her bed and settled themselves on the cushions as was usual with them. Raashi was extremely glad to see them and just like that, life was perfect once again. Raashi happily joined them on the bed, sitting next to them as she listened to them talk.

Sheena always had the latest news of everyone. Soon they were busy indulging in a typical gossip session that involved anyone and everyone in their social circle. Once they had run out of gossip to share, they finally moved on to their husbands.

“Kabier gave me such a hard time when he heard about how I was speeding the car on our girls’ night out.” Keya pouted. “As if I don’t know how to manage his car.”

“He’s just protective sweetie,” Raashi said.

Keya made a face. “I know, especially now that...” and then she just shut her mouth.

Raashi and Sheena glanced at one another and then back at her, arching their eyebrows.

“What are you not telling us?” Sheena asked her.

Raashi saw Keya look from her to Sheena and back to Raashi and said, “I am pregnant.”

Sheena’s mouth fell open.

“Are you serious?” Raashi said, moving closer to Keya on the bed.

Keya beamed. “We just told your mom today,” Keya told Sheena. “And I wanted to tell you guys first, before we announced it to the rest of the family. It’s too early yet but yes Kabier and I are going to have a baby.”

“Oh, My God! That’s so cool,” Raashi hugged her friend affectionately.

“I am going to be an aunt. I can’t believe it,” Sheena said excitedly, bouncing up and down on the bed.

“Uh, Sheena you do know that you cannot put this news up on any of your social media accounts, right?” Keya teased.

“Duh! I know that. Come here you,” Sheena said and enveloped Keya in her arms.

Raashi listened to her friends’ laugh and chat and reveled in the bliss she always felt when they were around. She was genuinely happy for Keya. Listening to her and Sheena talk excitedly about the baby made Raashi feel content. She watched them quietly as they spoke nonstop.

Suddenly becoming aware of her silence, Keya turned to her and clasped her hand. “You know honey, I know it’s not the right time to mention it, but I know.”

Raashi looked at her blankly and then to Sheena who looked back at her with a straight face. Raashi squinted her eyes questioningly at Sheena and she silently nodded back.

Raashi turned back to Keya, her heart squeezing and asked, “Just to be clear, what exactly do you know?”

“I know about him and you and what happened between you both on the night of my reception.”

Raashi turned to Sheena and before she could even form a question, Keya held up her hand to stop her from speaking. “She didn’t tell me, Kabier did. Sameer told Kabier and Rishi recently.”

Raashi was stumped. What exactly had he told them? Oh, this was just too callous. Why had he discussed that night with them? Why now? Was it because of the land? God! Sameer just made her so angry all the time.

Keya squeezed her hand again. “Raashi, relax honey. That perhaps didn’t sound right to you. But honestly, he didn’t give Kabier any details. You don’t need to be embarrassed. I promise he didn’t say much.”

Raashi released a ragged sigh.

“God! I am so sorry, Raashi. I wasn’t there when you needed me the most. I didn’t figure it out until recently that you had gone through so much and were hurt so awfully,” Keya said sadly.

Raashi took Keya’s hand in hers. “Keya, no, don’t be sad. I am fine. Besides, I am sorry for having kept it from you. I just didn’t want my problems to come in the way of your new found happiness.”

“Please, Raashi. Don’t ever feel that way again. You mean the world to me. You and Sheena. I love you both to bits,” Keya said. A tear spilled down her cheek. She rubbed the tear away and said, “God, I am so bloody emotional nowadays. Kabier doesn’t know how to handle it.” She laughed reaching out to Sheena and squeezing her hand as well.

“My cousin is an insensitive idiot. I am still angry with him for walking out on you like you were one of his usual flings. That dog. He knew you’re my best friend and I hate him for treating you so cheaply,” Sheena said angrily.

“Absolutely,” Keya said agreeing with her. “You know I am going to give him a piece of my mind when I meet him next.”

“No. You will do no such thing, Keya,” Raashi implored. “And please don’t talk about him like ‘he who shall not be named’ around me? I am not afraid to hear his name. So stop it you two.”

She looked at both of them for a second to gather her thoughts before continuing, “I took his hand that day and went with him already thinking of forever. But he didn’t share that sentiment. So, really, I shouldn’t blame him. Although I did for a long time, because I truly thought that he cared about me. There are so many scenarios that have played in my mind about that night and each time they always have the same ending. I wanted him that night and that’s why I went with him. I am at fault as well for assuming he wanted more when he obviously didn’t.” Raashi took a deep breath. “I have to move past it. I refuse to keep holding on to it. And most importantly, this cannot and should not be causing a rift between him and his family. ”

She turned to Sheena. “And you need to drop it as well. I know you’re hurting for me, Sheena. But let it go now. I have moved on and so has he. In all likelihood, he may marry Natasha. You guys have to move on. So many people have one-night stands. It’s just that my emotional quotient is too high even for my own comfort. It has taken me time to get over it but I am fine

now. I am stronger. For my sake you girls have to let it go. Okay?”

Her friends remained quiet but nodded in agreement.

“And by the way, I have some really funny and interesting news,” and then looking at their expectant and waiting faces, Raashi said, “Rithwik asked me to marry him.”

“No way,” Keya said.

“Oh. My. God,” Sheena remarked looking stunned.

“Explain. Now,” Keya said.

Raashi explained Rithwik’s situation to them, his father’s ultimatum and how she was at the top of his father’s list of brides. She also told them how serious Rithwik was about marrying her and that he had asked her to think about it.

“It’s so crazy, isn’t it? I mean Rithwik and me? God, I can’t even imagine it.”

“Why? I think you’d be perfect together. You’re both smart and independent, you are friends and you care for him. I don’t want to say it but let’s not forget he is the heir to Fortuna. Really Raashi, what’s not perfect here? Say yes and marry him,” Sheena said in her usual dreamy way.

Raashi saw Keya watching her carefully.

“What?” Raashi asked her.

“Yes,” Sheena insisted. “Tell her Keya. Tell her to marry him.”

“Hmm... and what about love and chemistry?” Keya asked quietly.

“Oh, come on, Keya,” Sheena said, “It’s Rithwik. We all know he’s hot. So, of course, the chemistry would be great. And he owns Fortuna or he will, once she marries him, so what’s not to love?” Sheena raised her hands dramatically.

Before Raashi could say a word, she heard Keya’s angry response. “That’s a super selfish thing to say. You married Rajiv for love and not his money so how can you expect her to settle for any less.” Turning to Raashi she said, “You’re not marrying him unless you’re one hundred per cent sure you can fall in love with him and he with you.”

“That’s just plain stupid,” Sheena muttered.

“No, it’s not,” Keya insisted.

Back and forth, Sheena and Keya argued. They weren't giving her a chance to talk at all. Finally, she put her hands on each of their mouths, effectively silencing them. "Okay, you two, enough now."

Raashi turned to Sheena. "I don't care about his money. I care about him and yes he's special to me. But I agree with Keya. I am not in love with him and he is definitely not in love with me. And I doubt we have any kind of chemistry to make it work. So no, I am not going to say yes to him."

Sheena mumbled something through Raashi's hand that was still pressed on her mouth. Raashi promptly took her hands away.

"At least, promise me you will think about it," Sheena entreated and then she turned to Keya. "Well, she can at least consider if it's possible for her to love Rithwik and him her." Sheena turned back to Raashi. "And as for the chemistry, well, have you ever, you know, been intimate with him?"

"Ugh, no, Sheena. It's Rithwik for God's sake. Even the thought of it is way too weird," Raashi replied, shaking her head.

Sheena scowled at her. "You are mad. One of the hottest, most eligible men we know has asked you to marry him and you are not even considering it. Please, for my sake give it more thought before you refuse him."

Before Raashi could reply the doorbell rang again, this time followed by the key turning in the lock. A few seconds later, Jiya came into Raashi's room and squealed in delight at seeing Keya and Sheena. Raashi watched happily as her sister giggled with her two friends. Everything was indeed right in her world, at least for now.

Chapter 12

“The problem is that security hasn’t been able to identify the thief. They have gone through several hours of footage back and forth and haven’t been able to find anyone fitting the thief’s description entering the hotel. The security footage we have of the thief is also not very clear. It’s mostly a side profile and the police cannot make much of it.”

Sameer looked around at all the people gathered for the meeting in his office. Apart from Kabier, Rishi and their grandfather, Sameer had requested his father to be present as well.

“Have you considered the fact that it could have been someone who was registered as a guest?” Kabier asked him.

“Yes, that thought did cross my mind. But so far nothing has come up on all our searches. Nonetheless, we will keep looking. We have passed on the information to the chief inspector in charge of the case and he promises to help in any way he can. Although now that the car has been returned without harm to the owner, this case doesn’t seem to be considered as top priority anymore for the police.”

They discussed the case for several more minutes and then Sameer’s father said, “From my point of view this looks like a one-off incident. But, you need to maintain a high alert in all the hotels and all company premises till we know what exactly is going on.”

“I agree,” said Janak.

Sameer nodded and so did Kabier and Rishi.

After his father and grandfather left, Sameer asked Kabier, “What are you doing tonight? Why don’t you join us for dinner? Rishi and I have made plans for a night out. Let’s make it a boy’s night, what say?”

Kabier shook his head, “Keya wants to stay in and relax. She’s been on the edge a lot. It’s all those baby hormones making her crazy. I just want to be around her at home.”

Kabier had just recently apprised them of Keya’s pregnancy and everyone in the family was delighted with the good news. Sameer smiled. It was really happening. One of them was going to be a father soon. He was thrilled for Kabier.

Rishi spoke up, “Looks like it’s going to be you and me tonight, brother.” He then pointed at Kabier. “This guy has been ditching us ever since he fell in love. And now he is behaving like a total and complete social recluse.”

Kabier laughed. “Oh, come on! You guys can come over and join Keya and me for dinner instead. You know you’re always welcome.”

“Uh, spending Friday night with an emotionally high pregnant woman and her adoring husband is not my idea of fun.” Rishi sounded appalled. “No way! Sameer and I are going out tonight and you can stay home and miss out on all the fun!”

Friday Night was busiest for Nox-MixGrill. Raashi had signed up with different bands to perform there live each Friday night. What had started because of her passion for music had turned out to be an extremely successful venture. People came from all over town to Nox-MixGrill on Fridays to enjoy the live band they had playing. And tonight they were featuring the band, Rhapsody. The band members were personal friends of hers. She herself had been a part of the band once.

At nineteen she had been their lead guitarist for two years, until she had to give it up and take over the business on the death of her grandmother. Now six years later, Rhapsody was one of the most successful bands not only in India but abroad too. She missed the boys, missed being a part of the crew, playing with them, creating music with them. But, that was another life and she had taken it in her stride. However, being personal friends with them ensured that she met them whenever they were in town and tonight for the first time they were going to play for her at her restaurant. It was going to be fabulous, she was sure of it.

“I thought it was just you and me for dinner,” Rishi complained to his elder brother.

“Well, that was the original plan, but I haven’t met Natasha this whole week and she wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I invited her to join us,” Sameer slowed the car at the traffic light.

When he saw Rishi’s grim face, he said, “Cheer up! We’ll still have fun. Anyway, I am sure you’ll hook up with some girl at whichever night club we’re going to, so what is the problem?”

“A guy wants to spend time with his brother and this is what he gets. I

should have taken up Kabier's offer instead," Rishi said sarcastically.

"Rishi, come on! Please understand," Sameer requested.

"Why Natasha? Why her? I was so glad when you ultimately got over her back then. Now you're with her again and this time maybe for good. Sheesh!" Rishi commented dryly.

"Look, I know what you feel about her. I am not asking you to like her." When Rishi rolled his eyes. Sameer said, "However, I do expect you to be civil to her."

"Don't go all big brother on me," Rishi complained as Sameer double parked in front of Natasha's house and sounded the horn.

Natasha shut the door of her home behind her and walked towards them dressed in a white, short, sleeveless dress and high stilettos. Rishi grinned mischievously as an idea formed in his head.

"By the way, Sameer, since you ruined my evening, you owe it to me to decide where to go tonight."

"Alright, Rishi, have it your way." Nodding at him, Sameer got out of the car to greet Natasha.

"Hey, you!" Natasha said, raising her lips to Sameer's mouth. Okay, so she wanted to take things to the next level, he thought. Ever since getting back with her, they hadn't got past the occasional kiss on the cheeks. But now seeing her obviously waiting, he obliged her with a quick peck on the lips. Unsurprisingly, the kiss did not make him feel a thing.

Shaking away that thought, he turned around when he heard Rishi come stand next to him and say, "Hi, Natasha!"

"Oh! Sameer, I didn't know Rishi was joining us tonight," Natasha commented, air kissing Rishi.

"Oh, well! Actually, Rishi and I were to..." Sameer started to say but Natasha interrupted him, "No problem, it's really quite sweet of you to invite Rishi along. I'm looking forward to catching up with him. Though I am sure his date will not give us enough time for that."

Sameer saw the sour expression on Rishi's face as all of them got into the car.

As they fastened their seat belts, Rishi said from behind, "As a matter of fact, it's just the three of us. Unfortunately, I don't have a date tonight."

Natasha turned to her side to look at Rishi. “Unfortunate indeed!”

Oh God! Rishi prayed for enough patience to get through the evening. He had never liked Natasha. She was a ‘social digger’, if ever there was such a word. She only socialized with people who could better her image, or those that could be of any use to her. Somehow, Sameer had been ignorant of this fact about her all those years back and he seemed equally unaware now too. Rishi himself had never gotten along with her. If Sameer actually married her then God help them all,

“Ok, then, Rishi, have you decided where we’re going tonight?” Sameer asked his brother, eyeing him through the rear view mirror.

“Sameer, why does Rishi get to decide where we’re going?” Natasha drawled, holding Sameer’s arm.

“Because, contrary to what you think, Sameer changed our original dinner plan to include you, so now I get to decide the plan for the evening,” Rishi said sweetly from behind.

“Rishi!” Sameer warned.

“What did I say?” Rishi raised his hands at the warning glance from his brother through the rear view mirror.

“Have you made up your mind, Rishi or should I make it for you?” Sameer asked.

“OK! OK! We’re going to Nox-MixGrill,” Rishi said, relaying the address to Sameer.

“Why there?” Sameer asked recognizing it as one of Raashi’s restaurants.

“Yes, why that place?” Natasha piped up as well.

“Because they have great food and live music on Friday nights. It’s excellent.”

“I am not going to some run-of-the-mill, odd and unknown place filled with random people,” Natasha complained.

“It’s not run-of-the-mill and it’s nowhere close to the kind of crowd you’re thinking it has,” Rishi countered back.

“All the same, I am not going there,” Natasha declared rudely.

Rishi exchanged a look for help with Sameer across the rear view mirror.

“OK, let’s do it this way, Natasha. We’ll check out the place Rishi wants

to go to. We'll stick around there for a while and if it's really not great then you get to choose where we go next."

"Fine. Whatever," Natasha said curtly and looked out her window.

As Sameer handed over his car keys to a waiting valet he wondered if Raashi would be here tonight. After his meeting with her four days back, he had been thinking a lot about her but wasn't ready to meet her again tonight. Not when his mind was still in knots regarding her. He had berated himself enough for wanting to give up his own dream to see hers through. He had thought long and hard on how to solve the land impasse between them, but had so far found no solution. He had to reach common ground with her and soon.

In any case, chances were that she might not even be here tonight. It was a Friday night. She may be at any of her other restaurants or out somewhere else.

Sameer watched as Rishi walked ahead of them. Natasha laced her hand with Sameer's as they entered the restaurant.

"Wow," Rishi exclaimed as soon as he walked into the small foyer that displayed a picture of the band playing. "I didn't know Rhapsody was playing here. Super luck to be here tonight!"

Sameer and Natasha followed him as he walked on further inside.

Whoa! The place was huge, Sameer thought. It was constructed in the shape of a semi-circle. The entrance was at one end which followed onto a straight bar. The floor curved from the entrance to the end of the bar into a huge arc. At the front, open center of the arc, a small stage was setup where the band was playing. People were crowded around the peripheries and near the bar area. Several tables were set up in small semi-circular alcoves and from where he was standing there was none vacant.

Voicing his thoughts aloud, Natasha spoke to Rishi, "Rishi, there is no table available and I absolutely refuse to stand here waiting."

"Hang on, I'll try and get us a table."

"How, by waving your magic wand?" Natasha asked sarcastically.

"Exactly," Rishi replied, waving his phone at her. Sameer saw Rishi move a distance away as he dialed and then spoke into the phone. Sameer knew exactly whom he was talking to.

Rishi returned to where Sameer and Natasha were waiting, in less than a minute.

“So, did you get us a table?” Natasha asked haughtily.

“I am not sure. I’ll know in five minutes.”

“Sameer, in five minutes if we don’t have a table, we’re leaving. I refuse to be standing here among so much crowd and God knows what kind of people,” Natasha complained.

Rishi’s phone buzzed almost immediately.

“Yes,” he said.

“You owe me big time for this, Rishi,” Raashi told him.

“You mean you got something for me.”

“Of course, anything for you,” she replied. Actually, it was plain luck that one of the prior reservations had been canceled.

“You’re my favorite girl.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere, Rishi,” Raashi quipped, laughing. “Tell me where you are, I’ll show you to the table.”

“I am right behind in the crowd, towards the entrance, near the bar.”

“Alright, walking towards you,” Raashi said, disconnecting the call.

“OK, we got it,” Rishi told them.

“Good,” Sameer said. Natasha didn’t say anything, but Sameer could see that her mood had now turned sour.

Raashi made her way through the crowd, smiling and greeting many people on the way. As she neared the entrance, she spotted Rishi a second before she saw Sameer standing next to him. She did a double take on seeing him and her heartbeat slipped into an uneven rhythm. Get a grip, Raashi told herself. She walked towards them, only to realize that he wasn’t alone. Natasha was standing next to him, her hand tightly intertwined with his.

For four days she hadn’t heard from him, hadn’t seen him. She had hoped she wouldn’t have to meet him again. But here he was looking handsome as ever in blue jeans and a black shirt, his sleeves casually folded, looking straight at her. Their eyes met and she saw his eyes light up, as he took her in from head to toe. Her expression faltered for a second, but she quickly schooled her features and put her social smile in place as she walked towards

them.

Sameer saw her long before she caught sight of him. He could see the pleasant smile she was showering on her patrons. He also noticed how she stopped by to chat briefly with several of them. Dressed in black and gold, she looked like a million bucks. Her skinny black cutout jeans fit her snugly. They were tucked into stiletto ankle boots that made her look taller than usual. She had teamed these with a gold shiny spaghetti top that made her warm complexion glow in the lights. Her lips were painted a bright red adding to the stunning effect. Thick gold earrings dangled from her ears. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders in loose, long curls. Damn! She looked good. He saw her smile at Rishi but saw the smile waver for exactly a second as she caught sight of him and Natasha. And then immediately the smile was back on her face as she came closer.

“That’s Raashi, isn’t it? What is she doing here? She seems to be everywhere,” Natasha complained.

“Excuse me?” Rishi said.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Natasha said.

“But you were talking about a friend of mine,” Rishi stated.

“I didn’t know you were friends with people like her. She’s a waitress for heaven’s sake, Rishi!”

“Didn’t you ever learn that you have to respect people, no matter what they do for a living?” Rishi asked. “Besides, she’s not a waitress. She owns this restaurant. In fact, she owns The Nox group. And if I were you, I’d watch my mouth around her, unless you enjoy being thrown out of restaurants.”

“Sameer! I can’t believe you are letting him talk like that to me,” Natasha complained.

Except, Sameer wasn’t listening. In point of fact, he had barely heard a word. He hadn’t even realized that his brother and Natasha were arguing. He was completely and undividedly lost in watching Raashi walk towards them, her hips swaying slightly, her bold red lips parted in a smile, her hair flowing, her warm complexion glowing golden in the lights. His heart skipped a beat. Oh, God...how she made him wish for things he didn’t want...things he didn’t need...things he didn’t have any space for in his life.

Natasha nudged him, squeezing the hand that she was holding, pulling

him close towards her. He blinked and looked at her, confused by the questioning expression on her face. He hadn't a clue what she had asked him.

Before he could make an inconsequential reply, Raashi had reached them.

Rishi went forward to hug her, "Hi, there!"

In her ear, he whispered, "Thank you for doing this for me. Otherwise, Madam here would have never have let me hear the last of it." He looked pointedly in Natasha's direction. Raashi couldn't help but laugh. Rishi was really cute but very wicked.

Sameer saw Raashi laugh at something Rishi had whispered in her ear and withdrawing his hand from Natasha's, moved forward.

"Hello!"

"Hey, Sameer!" Raashi replied.

Natasha came forward too. The girls exchanged greetings, albeit a bit awkwardly. The last time he was in one of her restaurants with Natasha, she had unceremoniously thrown them out and here he was repeating history, standing again in one of her restaurants with Natasha by his side.

"So, you own this place and AquaNox?" Natasha asked.

"Yes," Raashi replied. She saw the other woman sizing her from top to toe. She appraised her too, looking her over deliberately. She was not going to be cowed down by her.

Sensing the obvious tension between the two girls, Sameer decided to speak up. "Thanks Raashi, for your help."

"Anything for Rishi," she replied, smiling at Rishi.

"Great band playing tonight, Raashi. Isn't this the same band that you..." Rishi said, stepping closer to her.

"Yes," Raashi replied quickly. "Come on, I'll show you to your table?"

Sameer and Natasha followed behind Raashi and Rishi. Sameer heard Rishi ask her, "And this lead singer was the same one that you once..."

The remainder of Rishi's question and Raashi's reply was lost as they moved through the crowd. The music got louder as they got closer to the stage. Sameer saw Raashi point at someone in the crowd to Rishi while whispering something very softly to him. Sameer wondered what confidences she was sharing with Rishi with a tinge of envy. Damn! He was envious of

his own brother now. Before he could give it any more thought, Raashi stopped in front of their table. She had organized one for them right in the front of the stage.

As soon as they reached, the band took a break. Raashi settled them at their table and motioned to a nearby waiter, who came forward to take their orders.

“Thank God, they’ve taken a break. It’s just too loud and I think it’s going to be worse from where we’re sitting,” Natasha grumbled.

“Sorry,” Raashi spoke absently, shaking her head. Sameer could see her attention was on the stage. One of the band members was beckoning her, pointing to her and then to his guitar. Raashi was shaking her head frantically. Then with a strongly mouthed NO, she turned back to them. “Sorry! It was the best I could do in the circumstances.”

“Don’t apologize, Raashi. It’s great,” Sameer said.

“Yes, it’s so cool. Thanks to you, I have front row seats to watch Rhapsody play live,” said Rishi.

Sameer frowned when he saw the band member waving to her again. Raashi quickly turned to them, “Well, I’ve got to get back. You guys enjoy yourselves.”

Sameer saw the guy leap off the stage and go after Raashi as she disappeared into the crowd. Instantly, Sameer recognized the guy. His name was Dheer Malhotra. He had read somewhere about him. He was the lead singer of the band and a darling of the female populace. He also wrote most of his music himself plus he had his own successful music company and a movie production house. Sameer had heard some of his music and it was quite good. Rhapsody normally played a mix of fusion and rock, though he couldn’t claim to be an ardent fan.

A moment later, the crowd parted and he saw Raashi and Dheer arguing animatedly. He was speaking to her as if trying to convince her of something and she kept shaking her head. Finally, she pointed at the stage. Sameer saw him turn to see that the band had readied themselves to play again and were waiting for him. With a shake of his head he walked back, crossing their table and in the same stride leapt back on the stage.

What was going on between them, Sameer wondered. And what had Rishi been asking Raashi earlier about her and the lead singer of the band? Sameer

started to inquire, but when the band started playing again, he turned back to watch them play.

Raashi watched Dheer and the band play from a far corner. Dheer, being typically himself was pestering her again. He'd been bothering her ever since he agreed to perform here tonight. But she wasn't giving in to him. Mercifully, the band was playing in full swing since the past half an hour and he hadn't had the time to trouble her since then. The crowd cheered at the end of the song and she was thrilled for the band. They deserved the success, she thought. They had worked long and hard to reach the kind of acclaim they had acquired and she was proud of them. Suddenly, she realized that the band had stopped playing. Striding towards the stage to find out why they had stopped and if there was a problem, she stopped in her tracks when she heard Dheer's voice on the microphone.

Sameer had thoroughly enjoyed the last couple of songs. It had been so long since he had watched a gig being played live. And this band had only gotten better over the years. He saw Rishi cheer with the crowd and thankfully even Natasha seemed to be enjoying herself. He had noticed her tapping her foot a few times with the beats and more importantly she wasn't asking to leave. He saw the crowd applaud at the end of the song and instead of playing the next track, he saw the lead singer, Dheer, confer with the rest of his band members before walking up to the microphone again.

"OK, people! The next set of songs that we're going to perform for you are from our very first album, 'Bohemia'."

The crowd roared in delight.

"But, but," Dheer said raising his hands to silence the crowd, "playing this album will be incomplete, without the one person who was the soul behind Bohemia. She's here tonight and we all," he said pointing to the entire band, "will continue only if you convince her to play and sing with us."

Dheer turned to see where Raashi was standing and seeing her shocked expression, he gave her a wink and continued, "So, alright people, let's hear it for, Raashi! There she is."

Raashi watched horrified as the crowd began chanting her name. The jerk, Dheer! He was playing dirty. She hadn't sung with them in years. How could he expect her to just pick up the guitar and start where she had left off? She was going to kill him. But as of now, he had left her with no choice, unless

she wanted the place to go crazy. One song, that's it, that's all she would give him. She wasn't making a fool of herself, no way.

"Is my hearing alright or are they really chanting Raashi's name?" Sameer asked Rishi, a bewildered look on his face.

"Yes. She was one of their original band members," Rishi said and then continued to chant Raashi's name with the crowd.

"Raashi was once a part of this band?" Sameer asked. He was astonished.

"You seriously don't know anything about her, do you?" Rishi shook his head and continued, "That guy, Dheer, he and Raashi formed the band when they were nineteen, she played with them for two years before she had to give it up to take over T-Café."

Sameer heard the beep of a text message, once and then again. He saw Natasha pick up her phone and smile at its screen. Seeing her engrossed, he turned back to his brother.

"How is it that you know so much about her?" Sameer asked.

"Duh! Because unlike you, I actually talked to her back then. She was my friend until you made her disappear from our lives!" Rishi said scornfully.

Raashi reached the stage, where the bass guitarist handed her a guitar. Tentatively, she slipped the strap of the guitar over her neck. She settled its weight across her and took a shaky breath. The drummer started the fast paced beats for one of Rhapsody's first songs ever and on cue Raashi strummed her fingers over the guitar. She walked towards the center of the stage, her fingers flying over the guitar. Seeing her, the crowd burst into hysterical frenzy.

"Please welcome, my dearest friend, one of our original band members and my co-song writer on the album 'Bohemia', Raashi Deewan," announced Dheer.

The minute she started playing, she lost all her reserve. It was like going back in time when all she wanted to do was only play and make music.

Dheer gave her a high five and said, "For the rest of the night and for the first time in six years, we are playing not as Rhapsody but as Rhapsody REUNITED," saying this, he began playing his own guitar and started singing.

Sameer watched awestruck. He looked at Raashi, her fingers flying over

the guitar, creating magical notes. The music was extremely fast paced and she was strumming along brilliantly, singing the chorus with the lead singer. He watched them play and sing together. He was struck by the amazing chemistry they shared. Wordlessly, they picked up cues from each other, came together to sing into the microphone and then parted to different ends of the stage, coming back together again to sing.

Rishi turned to look at him and said, "It's the first time I am seeing her play like this. She's superb."

"That guy Dheer...and Raashi. There's something between them, right?" Sameer was curious to understand her equation with Dheer.

Rishi frowned at him before replying. "She was dating him for the two years she was in the band."

Sameer's face tensed.

Rishi saw his face and sneaked a glance at Natasha. She seemed to be least interested in their conversation. Still, he lowered his voice as he spoke. "Actually, after the way you treated her, I can't imagine why you're so inquisitive about her. But, since I can see you obviously are, look there," Rishi pointed. "See that table, right in front of where Dheer is playing?"

"Yeah," Sameer said, looking in the same direction.

"Can you see the lady in black and white sitting there, the one next to the guy in the baseball cap? That's Dheer's girlfriend. Raashi pointed her out to me earlier. And that guy in the baseball cap is his younger brother Vir Malhotra, the upcoming movie star. The boys are old friends of Raashi."

So his guess was correct. Raashi did have a history with Dheer. Even now they looked really comfortable with each other, he thought irritably. Natasha laid her hand on his and without thinking Sameer moved his hand away.

Natasha felt her anger rise when Sameer moved his hand away from under hers. She could see that Sameer wasn't paying her much attention. Oh, he performed the polite necessities well enough. But he hardly ever spoke to her. In fact, she did most of the talking when they were together, just like this evening. She felt that things were not the same between them now. He was different. In the past when they were dating, his whole world had revolved around her. He would go out of his way to be with her and to make her comfortable. But this time around, since they had started going out together, he was always distant. It had been so long since he had met her. Even tonight

he hadn't really been that keen to meet. Only after she had forced him had he agreed to go out with her.

When her father had proposed marriage between Sameer and her as an option to solve their business problem, she had leapt at the idea. She knew Sameer had once been crazy about her, probably still was, considering that she hadn't heard of a single steady relationship in his life after her. She hadn't been ready to settle down with him earlier, but it was the perfect time for her to marry Sameer Sehgal now.

When they were dating, they had been so young. He had been twenty-four and had not yet made his own mark when he had proposed to marry her. She had laughed at his proposal and they had broken up shortly thereafter. She had not been ready then to be tied down to one man. She wanted to experience life to the fullest. But now almost seven years later, Sameer Sehgal was one of the most eligible bachelors in the country, devilishly handsome, and his name itself was worth its weight in gold. He had made it in life. This time, marrying him seemed the most attractive offer she had ever received.

However, things were not going as planned. He had been completely enamored by her all those years ago and she had expected to lure him easily, as she once had, but now he was hard as ice. None of her outward charms worked on him anymore. For the past hour she had observed how he had eyes only for that girl, Raashi. Ever since she had come on stage, Sameer's attention had been fixed on her. Natasha prided herself on being extremely shrewd and reality was that her relationship with Sameer was not going anywhere. If the situation continued the way it was, she doubted that Sameer would actually be proposing to her, as she and her father expected and wished.

Annoyed, both with him and herself for being in the position she was in, she asked him, "Can we leave now?"

She could see that he was still distracted as he dragged his eyes off the stage to look at her. "Why?"

"Because, I've had enough of this place for tonight," she said.

"I thought you were having a good time." He looked back at the stage. The band was gearing up for their next number. He saw Raashi and Dheer deep in conversation and finally he saw Dheer shove Raashi into a chair in

front of the microphone. She turned to look at Dheer pleadingly, but he ignored her and jumped off the stage. Sameer saw Dheer sit next to his girlfriend. They exchanged a warm glance and Dheer put his arm around her. Sameer let out a deep sigh of relief as he realized that whatever Dheer had once felt for Raashi was obviously long since buried.

Natasha held his arm and he turned to her, "What?"

She picked up her bag and started walking away from the table. He caught up to Natasha in two long strides and held her elbow. "What's wrong, Natasha?"

"What's wrong? Ask yourself that," she snapped back at him angrily.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I am talking about the fact that I came to a place I had no interest in because of you. Then you let me get insulted by your brother. Fine, I took that in stride. But then you have ignored me thoroughly throughout the evening. "

"What did Rishi do to you now?" Sameer was completely confused by her behavior. Here he was having a great time while Natasha was behaving obstinately and ruining a fine evening.

Natasha stared at him for a second before saying, "Nothing. Just leave it. Are you going to take me home right now or should I make my own arrangements?"

Frustrated, Sameer turned to tell her exactly how he felt about her behavior when he heard Raashi's lilting voice surround him. He turned back to the stage to see Raashi playing the guitar and singing a slow, love melody, the guitar notes straining in the background, adding to the mesmerizing beauty of her voice. Sameer stood shell shocked listening to her sing. She sang about love, about falling in love and celebrating it.

"This rude and impolite behavior is exactly the thing that pisses me off, Sameer," Natasha said.

Without looking at her, he said, "Not now, Natasha. I am not in the mood for your tantrums tonight. I am enjoying the music and I am requesting you to stay for at least a half an hour more. I will then, of course, take you home, or you can choose to take off on your own, right now. It's entirely up to you."

Natasha could hardly believe the cool aloofness in his voice. It was so not

like him. She hesitated for a moment debating whether to leave, hanging on to her pride or to just stay on as he was asking, for a little while more.

When Sameer returned to the table with Natasha in tow, Rishi whispered, “Bravo!”

“Back off, Rishi,” Sameer said irritably.

“Sorry!” Rishi said. “Just relax and enjoy.”

Sameer was glad he could concentrate on Raashi’s singing. Her voice was beautiful. She was beautiful. Something stirred within him. He tried to silence it. And tried desperately to avoid listening to that voice inside his head. But not tonight. Tonight that voice was telling him loud and clear that what he felt for Raashi was more than some kind of insane physical attraction. It ran deeper, thicker. He cared for her, a lot. And while he couldn’t clearly put more words or depth into his feelings for her, he knew he wanted to be with her, spend time with her, hear her laugh more often, see her eyes shine especially for him. That’s when he knew that this thing with Natasha was over. It had no future, none whatsoever, since Raashi had come back into his life.

He had walked out of Raashi’s life once, but he was going to move heaven and earth to walk back into it again. He wanted to be a part of her life. He felt a myriad of emotions for her and he had to figure out what they meant. Her melodious voice broke into his thoughts and he clapped with the rest of the crowd as she finished. For a moment she looked up, straight at him and smiled. In that one second Sameer made up his mind. He knew what he had to do.

He turned to Natasha. “Let’s go.”

“But you said...”

“I know what I said. I changed my mind.” He then spoke to his brother. “We’re leaving now. What do you want to do?”

“You carry on! I’ll stick around here for a while. Probably catch a cab home,” Rishi replied, sensing the tension between his brother and Natasha. However, he believed the evening had turned out to be a thorough success. Mission accomplished!

Raashi’s heart faltered for a moment as she saw Sameer leave with Natasha. In that one moment their eyes had met and she had stared helplessly

at him, until Dheer had snagged her attention back. Raashi mentally scolded herself. Sameer was with another woman now and she just had to get over whatever it was that she felt for him.

Sameer drove Natasha home in absolute silence. He was still trying to put in perspective the decision he had taken. He thought about it and was convinced. He wanted Raashi back. That was crystal clear to him now more than ever. How else could he define the possessiveness he felt towards her, the insanity that gripped him when she was in his arms? Yes, he was right. This was the only way forward for him. He turned to look at Natasha. She had not said a word since they had left the restaurant and he could see that she was extremely mad.

“Natasha...” he began.

She turned away to look out of the window, ignoring him.

This was going to be tougher than he had thought. He drove in silence the rest of the way and parked in front of her house.

As soon as the car stopped, she unbuckled her seat belt and started to open her door. He caught her arm. She turned to look at him.

“We need to talk,” he said.

Her eyes widened with rage. “No. There is nothing I want to hear from you, especially after the way you spoke to me earlier.”

Sameer almost lost it with her arrogant and overbearing behavior. But he needed to remain calm to have this conversation.

“Look, Natasha. I am sorry about what happened earlier. But over the past few weeks and especially tonight I have come to the conclusion that you and I, we are just poles apart. We want different things in life and this...” he gestured with his hand pointing to the two of them, “...is not working out as it should be.”

If he had thought she was angry before, it was nothing compared to what he could see in her eyes now. He could appreciate that she hadn't been expecting him to say that.

She kept quiet refusing to look at him. And then after several quiet seconds fraught with tension, she turned to him. “I can't believe how badly you've treated me today. You let your brother be rude to me, you ignored me for most of the evening because you couldn't get your eyes off Raashi and

now this. I just wanted to spend time alone with you and this is what I get in return. Thanks a lot, Sameer. You sure are very adept at making a woman feel special!”

Exasperated, Sameer ran his hand through his hair. She just wasn’t getting it. “You’re not listening, Natasha. This has nothing to do with my brother or Raashi or with tonight. We had a history and I thought because of that we would be able to make a go at a relationship again. I was wrong. We were done years back and to even think we could resurrect something that was long over was a mistake.”

“Fine, Sameer. Have it your way for now. When you get bored of that waitress, you’ll know where to find me. It’s not like I don’t know how marrying me will be the best thing for you and your business.” Saying that, she got out of the car and opened the gate of her house. She hurried away without a second glance.

Sameer watched her as she walked away. He went over their conversation in his mind and realized there was nothing more he could have said to make his position clearer to her. The only thing left was to speak to Jiten Arya directly. He drove home feeling more content than he had in days.

Chapter 13

“So you’re telling me that the plans will be finalized latest by Thursday next?” Sameer confirmed.

He was in a meeting with his architects. The solution for the land issue had come to him out of the blue and now that he had given it enough thought, he realized it might just be perfect. However, he wanted something concrete to present to Raashi.

They had poured over the land and villa layout for hours, discussing various nuances and he had exactly what he wanted beyond a doubt. He thanked the team and decided to wait patiently for the new plans he had authorized. In the meantime, he had to gather enough ammunition to back up his plan.

Sameer watched the rain beating on the floor to ceiling high window of his top floor office for a few moments, smiling to himself and then left to meet the only person who could influence Raashi.

Raashi looked at her watch again. They were late. She was sitting here in Sameer’s office waiting for him and Janak to make an appearance. She had arrived on time, but was a little annoyed to have been informed by Sameer’s assistant that he and Janak were in a meeting with the board and would be delayed by a few minutes. The few minutes had now extended to half an hour and there was still no sign of them. She switched on the TV and tried to watch the news, but her mind was bubbling restlessly and she turned it off. Getting off the beautiful and very comfortable sofa, she started pacing the length of his office. If it hadn’t been for Janak, she would never have agreed to this meeting in the first place. But Sameer very cunningly had used Janak to get her here. He knew she could never say no to Janak and it was only out of respect for Janak that she was still here. Janak had promised that this would be the last time this land matter would be discussed. He had also assured her that he wouldn’t influence her in anyway. She had thus been left with no option but to get this over with, once and for all.

She looked around Sameer’s office impressed with what she saw. Sameer’s office had an understated elegance that was so like him. Black and metal dominated the theme. Colorful paintings lined the walls and added to

the vibrancy of the place. She walked towards the glass windows and stood silently observing the view of the now darkening city.

Sameer entered his office and found Raashi standing by his window, lost in thought. She turned when he shut the door behind him.

“Hi,” he said, unable to stop himself from looking fixedly at her.

It had been a week since he had seen her. And he had thought of her every single day, every single moment. She looked really breathtaking in a pale pink and white full-length dress, her hair loose around her.

“Where is Janak?”

“Should be here any moment. I am sorry for the delay,” he ran a tired hand through his hair.

Raashi looked at him and felt a pang in her heart. He had lines around his eyes and he looked worn-out. She watched as he took off his jacket and flung it on the sofa.

She couldn't help herself as she walked towards him and asked warmly, “Bad day, huh?”

“Oh! You can't imagine. First, I had to deal with some labor problems at a construction site and then this board meeting where all of us were at odds. I mean, Kabier, Rishi, grandfather and I, none of us could agree on anything. And worst of all, I have just been informed of another incident in my hotel.”

“Oh, no! What's happened now?” she asked.

“This was at the Sehgal Plaza in Juhu. Rhea was attending a wedding function at the lawns there and she called to tell me that someone gatecrashed the event,” he let out a deep tired sigh. “Apparently, some guy was photographing the guests with a high end camera. Initially, no one suspected anything. Everyone thought he was an invited guest. However, one of the hosts found his behavior slightly suspicious and asked around about him. But no one seemed to know him. They confronted him thereafter. The hotel security was called in immediately, but he managed to escape. I just spoke to the GM of the Sehgal Plaza and he confirmed the incident.”

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that,” Raashi told him genuinely.

“Yeah, well, the staff is searching the hotel premises to see if he is still there. I doubt it though. I just hope this doesn't turn into another publicity nightmare for us. The media were all over the car theft at The Marquis.” He

took a deep breath. “Anyway, it’s just one of those days, I guess. Can I get you some tea-coffee, anything?”

Raashi pointed towards an empty cup and saucer, on the table in front of the sofa she had been seated on earlier.

“Oh, OK! Shall we get on with our meeting or wait for grandfather?”

“Let’s start. It’s late and I am pretty sure he wouldn’t mind us starting without him,” she replied confidently.

Sameer walked up to his desk and gestured towards the chair in front of his table. She came forward and sat on one of the plush leather chairs facing him. He took a seat on his chair behind his desk and leaned back into it. He looked at her, searching for the perfect words to start off the discussion. Her face revealed nothing. His heart gave a little jerk knowing she had the power to reject it all.

Taking a deep breath, he said, “I have been giving this issue a lot of thought. We need to come to a resolution and find a common ground.”

“I am all ears,” Raashi said sweetly. Sameer picked up on the sarcasm but continued.

“I want to help you restore the villa and I will build the restaurant for you, just the way you want it. You can have whatever design you wish, spend whatever you want. The final say will be yours.”

She narrowed her eyes. “OK! You got my attention, Sameer. What is in it for you?”

“I would like to work with you and use the remaining land surrounding the villa to build my spa. Your restaurant will be attached to the spa. I can extend The Marquis and make the spa as a new wing adjacent to it.”

“This doesn’t make sense. The land belongs to me. You want to use my land to extend your hotel onto it and add the spa to it? I don’t get how this could work. What exactly are you suggesting?”

Sameer watched her silently for a moment before dropping the bombshell on her. “In reality, it will work if you allow me to buy the land back and let me lease the villa out to you for a ninety-nine year unbreakable lease.”

Raashi sat back in her chair, shocked at his words. She couldn’t believe his proposal. He was just so sure of himself. Why would she want to give him her land at all?

She opened her mouth to say something scathing, but Sameer raised his hand to stop her.

“Please, Raashi, don’t react without thinking this through. I can see from your face that you are not too happy with what I have proposed and are itching to give me a mouthful. But think about this. It’s perfect for both of us. You get to have your vintage restaurant and it will have the added benefit of immediate clientele by lieu of being connected to The Marquis, plus I am willing to build it for you, free of cost. I am also agreeing to buy the entire land back from you. Consequently, you get to fulfill your dream for free, at no cost to you at all.”

Raashi tilted her head to the side. “You are quite something, Sameer. Why would you think that I need money from you of all people to build the restaurant? I can manage the money on my own. I don’t need to sell to you at all.”

What was her problem? Sameer thought. He was offering her dream to her on a platter. What else could anyone wish for? If only she would let go of her prejudice against him, she’d see that this was a perfect solution for the both of them.

“You’re being unyielding just for the sake of it,” Sameer said.

“No, I am not,” Raashi retorted fiercely.

“Why do I get the feeling you had already made up your mind before you even came here? You’re dismissing my idea without giving it any consideration whatsoever.”

“I have given your idea enough thought, more than it actually deserves and...” before Raashi could finish, the door opened and Janak walked in. She stood up, turning when Janak came towards her. Janak greeted her and hugged her warmly.

“Hi, Janak!” Raashi said.

“Raashi, my angel! How are you?” Janak replied affectionately, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

Raashi smiled at the gesture; something he had been doing since she was twelve. “I am fine.”

Janak turned to look at Sameer. “How is it going? I trust you have told Raashi of your plans.”

Sameer nodded and reached to pick up his cell phone that had started ringing.

“Sorry,” he said, looking at Raashi and his grandfather. “I need to take this call.” Distracted, he walked towards the window with his phone to his ear.

Raashi spoke to Janak, “You knew of this preposterous idea and yet you allowed it?”

Janak narrowed his eyes at Raashi. He realized she was extremely upset. He led her to the sofa in the corner and sat down with her. “I think Sameer has made some excellent suggestions. Why do you not like them?”

“Because...because he believes he can wave his money in my face and I am going to fall backwards to give him what he wants. I am really sorry, Janak, but that’s not going to happen,” Raashi said heatedly.

Taken aback by her reaction, Janak touched her hand. “There’s something more going on here, isn’t it? It’s not like you to be so rigid. You are one of the most reasonable people I know.”

Raashi breathed out a deep sigh and remained silent. Maybe she was being difficult because she didn’t want to come to a compromise with Sameer. To be honest, what he was offering her was good. She understood that. She would get all that she wanted and at no cost to her.

Plus, he was willing to buy the land back at a very fair price. But the land hadn’t been hers to begin with. It had been his, until Janak gave it to her. She felt guilty taking money from him for a land that he had once owned. It was not like she didn’t need the money. Of course, she needed it. She wasn’t super rich. The extra money meant she could clear all past loans, possibly give a raise to all her staff and perhaps change the entire air conditioning at the T-Café. Logically, the entire solution made perfect sense to her. On her own, she would have taken a loan to build the restaurant. He was literally offering her a way out of all her problems. What was wrong with her? This decision should be easy.

But then again, she had to accept that a part of her wanted to punish him for how he had hurt her. She had something that he wanted desperately and she was thrilled that she was controlling the stakes and in a position to say no to him.

Oh, God! This was so not like her to think like this. She ought to consider

the option that he had given her and work it out with him. On the other hand that meant that she would be spending endless hours with him and that was something she didn't want. She sighed again. This was so confusing and she was completely out of ideas here. She folded her hands on her lap and turned to Janak, who was patiently waiting for her to answer.

"What do you think I should do?" Raashi asked him.

"I can't tell you that. You have to do what your heart tells you to. All I can say is, I want both of you to be happy. You are very important to me, Raashi, but so is he." Janak glanced warmly at Sameer, who was standing with his back to them, still talking on his cell phone.

"And Raashi, whatever he may have done earlier, this time he is not wrong. He wants this to work with you and you need to consider this carefully."

Raashi digested what Janak was saying. He had told her to give this a chance, in not so many words. His call over, Sameer came and sat down opposite her. "Sorry, but this day seems to never end."

"All OK?" Janak asked pointedly.

Sameer nodded. He rubbed his aching neck. "Yes. I have handled the problem. Now, let's get back to the discussion on hand."

Raashi watched as he loosened his tie and opened the collar button of his shirt. She saw him wearily folding the sleeves of his shirt, the tension etched on his face, his shoulders stiff. He was exhausted and she was being tough and ruthless.

"Sameer, I agree to think about this, about all your suggestions."

He was clearly confounded by her sudden turn around. She could see his bewildered expression. He looked at her and then turned his head to his grandfather and then back to her. It took him a moment to understand that Janak had a hand in making her change her mind. Well, that sure was the truth, she thought.

He smiled. "That's good. In fact, I have some plans drawn up by my architects that we could go through right now. It will give you a better idea of what I have in mind. I'll just get them."

He stood up and as he passed her to move towards his desk, she stood and caught hold of his arm. He stopped and turned to face her. She felt the

muscles beneath her hand shift in response to her touch. She couldn't look away from his blatant stare. She realized that he was as aware of her, as she was of him. They stood like that, eyes locked, her hand on his arm, for an eternity, until they heard Janak cough beside them.

Quickly, she moved her hand away. "Not today, Sameer. I can see that you're exhausted. You seem to have a lot to do. We can do this another time."

Sameer watched her trying to hide what she felt for him. But now was not the time or place for this thing between them.

"Let's meet tomorrow again, here, in my office and I can show you the plans. Will you come, please?"

She heard the earnestness in his voice. This was Sameer, who was normally so arrogant and confident. He was pleading with her? Something shifted inside her and she said, "Okay."

Sameer felt like a heavy weight had been lifted from him. He felt himself relax. "Tomorrow then."

Raashi checked her cell phone to look over her scheduled appointments.

"Yes, but late. Does eight in the evening work for you?" Raashi asked.

Sameer nodded. "Thanks. Please trust me on this. I really want what's best for both of us."

Raashi tilted her head to the side.

"I am willing to give this a try, but trust? That you will have to earn," And then she turned and walked away with a parting smile and nod to his grandfather.

Sameer stared at the close door, contemplating her last statement. He would make her trust him again, he promised himself. As he turned around, he saw his grandfather smiling at him.

"What are you smiling about?" Sameer asked, shaking his head.

"Nothing," Janak replied innocently.

Sameer raised his eyebrows.

"Well, if you really want to know, I like the way she has you all twisted up in knots," Janak said proudly.

"You do remember that you're my grandfather?"

Janak regarded him solemnly.

“And you would do well to remember that you being my grandson is the only reason I did not cut you up and hang you to dry after what you did to her.”

Sameer was speechless.

“She told...”

Janak waved his hand and cut him off. “No, she did not. No one did for that matter.”

Sameer raised his hands in the air. “Well then, how do you know? And, what do you know?”

Janak stood up and headed towards the door. He put his hand on the knob and turned to look back at Sameer.

“I have always kept a watch on my angels, all three of them, right until Sheena and Keya got married. The two of them don’t need me looking out for them anymore. So that leaves my most special girl, Raashi. Do you think, I wouldn’t come to know if my own grandson seduced her in my own hotel? Have you not learned that nothing in a hotel can remain a secret for long? You may run the hotel, but do not forget that I have eyes and ears everywhere, especially if it concerns my girls. You walked out on her like a coward, leaving her devastated.”

“Is that why you gave her my land?” Sameer asked his grandfather angrily. “Was that supposed to be my punishment?”

Janak walked back to Sameer.

“No, my dear boy, what I have done is given you a chance to redeem yourself. She is the most special thing to have happened to you and you are too bloody blind to see it. Thus, it’s in your own interest to patch up with her and claim her as your own or watch quietly on the side lines while Rithwik Bali sweeps her off her feet and marries her.”

“What?” Sameer was thunderstruck.

“Yes, you heard me right. For reasons I don’t want to get into, Rithwik Bali needs to marry urgently and I know he has proposed to Raashi. So while Kabier had nothing to fear from Rithwik and Keya’s friendship, you on the other hand need to decide what you want from Raashi, before it’s too late, because Rithwik is making a play for her and he just might win.”

Saying that, Janak Sehgal walked out, leaving Sameer astounded. Good, Janak thought. His grandson had become way too arrogant and overconfident. A little competition never hurt anyone and Sameer definitely needed a push in the right direction. Janak hoped that with this conversation things would proceed just the way he wanted. The meeting had surely turned out to be a great success, Janak thought to himself contentedly, with a smile.

Chapter 14

Raashi looked at herself in the mirror of the elevator as she rode up to Sameer's office. She would do, she thought. Her dark denims and orange flowing top looked fine. She was nervous. She rubbed her clammy hands on her jeans, uncertainly. She was being paranoid. Relax, she told herself. This was purely going to be business. She better start behaving maturely, like the businesswoman she was and not like an unsure teenager. It was only a matter of time; once she accepted his offer and signed on the dotted line, she would be spending innumerable hours with him in meetings and discussions. This evening was just the start.

As she neared his office, she realized the door was slightly ajar. She could hear raised voices and loud, angry words being exchanged. She looked at her watch. It was eight in the evening and there was hardly anyone on this floor. She waited outside as the arguments raged inside, most of which could be clearly heard from where she was standing.

Sameer had been waiting for Raashi. He was wrapping up his last meeting with Rishi when the door burst open and his sister Rhea stomped inside, a fireball of rage and resentment. Both of them quickly got to their feet as they saw her.

"Did you threaten Shauna with cutting off her allowance, if she didn't tell you what was going on with me?" Rhea questioned, her eyes burning in fury.

Sameer didn't know what she was talking about. Rhea went to Rishi and poked a finger in his chest. "You have no right to threaten her into breaking my trust."

His sister was petite and tiny. But her dynamic, volcanic personality usually made up for her lack of height. However, right now, she looked pale and tired. She had dark circles around her normally sparkly eyes. Rishi and he had been trying to get her to talk to them since the past many weeks but she had stood strong. She still refused to tell them why she had decided to quit her studies and return home so suddenly. He figured Rishi would have tried different means to get to the bottom of it all because at this point all of them were feeling helpless. He was also aware that Kabier and Sheena had both tried to talk to her but she had brushed them off as well.

“Rhea, I...” Rishi started to say, but she cut him off poking him in the chest again as she spoke rudely and loudly. “This is my life. Not yours. I will tell you what I want to and when. You dare not meddle. Shauna has nothing to do with this, do you get it?”

And then Sameer was taken aback when his normally easy-going brother exploded, “Drop the attitude and the tone Rhea. I am done playing nice with you. You land up here unexpectedly and declare that you’re not going back to study. When we ask you why, you refuse to tell us anything. Since you have returned, you have been difficult and insolent.” Rishi took a deep breath. “Do you know how frustrating it is, not knowing why your sister is throwing her career and life away? Seems to me you’re behaving like an ungrateful brat as usual.”

Sameer saw the hurt flicker in Rhea’s eyes for a brief moment and then she stood taller and breathed out a deep sigh.

She looked at both of them, “What is frustrating is that neither of you really care about me or what I want. You know nothing about me. You have never made the effort to talk to me. You are patronizing and full of yourself. So for the last time I am telling you#8230; no, I am informing you, I am not going to change my mind. I am not going back and you can’t make me.”

Rishi stepped forward, his eyes narrowed in anger. Sameer swiftly stepped in between his siblings. “Look, both of you need to calm down and talk rationally.” He turned to Rhea and held her arm gently. “He’s just concerned, Rhea. We all are.”

She just shrugged him off. “Really? The only thing you’re concerned about is that you can’t control me anymore. I have stepped out of that dumb imaginary box you have created around Shauna and me. You have set these boundaries for us; what we should do, how we should behave, whom we should hang out with and on and on. The list is never ending. It’s stifling me. And now that you have realized that I have a mind and will of my own, you guys cannot and will not accept it.”

Sameer felt his anger rise at her words. All that they wanted was to keep their sisters safe and to protect them. But his sister refused to understand that as usual.

“Like I said, ungrateful brat!” Rishi exclaimed furiously. “You have been given opportunities most people don’t ever get at your age and instead of

being grateful, you want to rebel. Tell me one thing that we have asked you to do that has been wrong for you. One thing that we have wanted for you that didn't have your best interests at heart?"

Rhea threw her hands in the air. "God! You guys just don't get it, do you? We are humans and we are allowed to make mistakes. You cannot decide everything for us. You have to let us live. I am glad I never confided in you guys because you obviously will not understand. You will only judge and find a way to blame me as usual."

"Rhea," Sameer said, raising his voice. "You are being unfair to us. How can we help unless you don't tell us what is troubling you?"

Sameer saw her glare at both of them. "All our conversations begin and end with both of you yelling at me. I should never have come back here. I should have dealt with everything in London itself."

Saying that, she stormed out the door banging it behind her.

Raashi saw Rhea leave Sameer's office hurriedly, a tear escaping her eyes that she swiped away angrily as she saw her.

"So, I guess you heard everything?" Rhea asked her. Raashi nodded, walking up to her.

Raashi stood in front of her and clasped her hands in her own as she saw another tear escape the younger girl's eyes. "Hey, sweetheart. No matter what happened inside, I know your brothers care for you."

"I know they care," Rhea said between silent tears. "It's just that they never try and understand, ever."

Raashi held her hands tighter, "Look. You are a strong girl and very brave to stand up to both your brothers, the way you did. You fought for your sister and for yourself. So chin up and no more tears." Rhea gave her a soft smile in return.

"Thanks, Raashi," Rhea said, calmer now.

Raashi gave her a hug. "If you ever need to talk to someone, know that I am there and available any time. Alright?"

Rhea nodded.

"Now, let me see one of those bright smiles of yours," Raashi said.

"I like you, Raashi," Rhea gave her a soft smile. "Always have, always

will.”

“I feel the same, honey.” Raashi waved at her as she left. As the elevator doors shut on Rhea, Raashi turned towards Sameer’s office and strode inside. She was fuming.

“You guys are the two biggest idiots in history,” Raashi said angrily.

Sameer was still in distress at his sister’s parting words. But he was even more shocked to see Raashi so angry.

“Your door was open and I overheard most of your conversation, if you can even call it that, with your sister,” Raashi told him understanding his unspoken question.

Rishi looked at the two of them. “I am just going to leave now.”

Raashi turned to Rishi, her full fury directed towards him now, “Don’t you dare move one step from here. I am not finished with you, Rishi Sehgal. You treated that girl so badly. Ungrateful brat! How could you call her that?”

“What do you want me to say, Raashi? I am just so livid, frustrated and helpless where she’s concerned,” Rishi said, shoving his hands into his pockets irritably.

“Rishi’s right. We just don’t know how to deal with her,” Sameer said, feeling frustrated.

“Maybe all she needs is space and time to come around.”

“How much more time does she need? It’s been a month already,” Sameer said strongly.

“Anger and irritation is the last thing that girl needs. She’s a kid. A kid who perhaps is in trouble and maybe she is afraid to tell her older brothers about the trouble she’s in because she fears your reaction. Why don’t you get it?”

She saw the brothers exchange a worried look.

“You have damned her from the beginning. You’re furious because she is not confiding in you and she is afraid of telling you what’s going on with her because she knows she will face your wrath when she does. What do you think is the easy way out for her? You tell me?” Raashi was beyond herself.

Sameer stared at Raashi as the impact of her words hit him. She was right.

“God! I hate it when these women are right,” Rishi said. He rolled his

shoulders. "I am going to try and make up with Rhea."

Raashi gave him a slight nod as he left.

She watched Sameer leaning against the glass window in his office, lost in thought. She reached out and put a hand on his arm.

"You need to give her time, Sameer. Talk to her nicely. Stop dictating to her and giving her instructions. Stop demanding she give you answers. Be there for her. Not as her elder brother, but as her friend. She needs help and you are the best person to give it," Raashi said softly.

He sighed. "You are right. I am going to take a go at this situation from a different angle. It hurts me to see her upset like this."

He lifted her hand from his arm and held onto it silently for a moment, his eyes on their clasped hands. Then he looked at her. "You're cute when you are angry."

Raashi felt her lips curving at the edges. She tried to move her hand away from his but he held on tight. He cocked his head to one side and smiled at her. In that split second when he smiled, Raashi knew that this was going to be a trying evening. He literally stole her breath away. He was wearing a white shirt, its top two buttons undone and its sleeves rolled halfway up his arms with charcoal grey trousers. He oozed confidence and raw sensuality. She had to force her mind back to the reasons she was here for, while his eyes continued to hold hers in a trance.

Sameer lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her wrist. Her breath hitched but she stood still. She wasn't going to let him know how his touch affected her, how it messed her up.

"Thank you," he said warmly.

She fidgeted until he released her hand.

"So, are you hungry?" Sameer asked quickly. "I've already ordered food. It's Chinese and probably rather cold now, I hope you don't mind." He pointed to the array of platters on the small table.

"Not at all," she replied with a smile.

Raashi sat on the sofa and started uncovering the platters. Sameer handed her a plate.

They spoke casually for a while until she asked him, "What happened about the gatecrashing incident at The Sehgal Plaza?"

“Nothing, actually,” he said. “The hotel security couldn’t find the guy taking the photographs and the hosts eventually found the whole thing harmless. They brushed it off saying that their function was just too glamorous and they didn’t blame the guy for wanting to be a part of it.”

“Really? They’re not bothered at all?” Raashi asked, intrigued by the incident.

“Strange are the ways of the rich and famous. A large celebrity crowd was in attendance at the function that day. Rhea couldn’t stop gushing about Vir Malhotra,” Sameer replied casually.

Raashi laughed. “Yeah, Vir has quite a fan following these days. He is going to be a big star and soon.”

“That day at Nox-MixGrill when I heard you sing, you were mind-blowing. I couldn’t believe there was this side of you that I knew nothing of. Do you miss it?”

“At times, I do. Music was such an important part of my life at one time. But, that part of my life was over the day my grandmother died and I had to take responsibility of the business and my kid sister. So yeah, music took a back seat. I don’t even own a guitar any more. I gave it away a long time back. And to think that there was a time when I never went anywhere without it,” Raashi mused.

“Would you want to go back to being a musician again, someday?”

“Honestly, no. I did it once and it was great while it lasted. Of course, leaving the band was tough for me. We were like a family and the boys took a long time to forgive me for leaving them. But they are hugely successful now and I am successful in my own right. Besides, this restaurant business is in my blood. I love it. I never thought I would take to it so effortlessly.

“Janak...” she lifted a shoulder, “he was there when I needed him the most. I learnt so much from him and all the people he sent my way to help me run the business. Honestly, I owe it all to him. I wouldn’t have succeeded without his support.”

“I know. I get it.” Sameer said. “He’s one of those people who understands you completely. He understands what you want, what you’re feeling and then he helps you find your own solutions to your problems.”

“Absolutely.”

Raashi stayed silent for a long time, reliving the early days of her business after she took over, since her grandmother had passed away. Then she saw Sameer watching her quietly. She never spoke about that part of her life to many people. Even Dheer, who she once dated, never understood her need to quit the band and continue her legacy. He never recognized how important it was for her to continue what her grandmother had left unfinished. Janak in those days had been her lifeline and that again had been something Dheer had not been able to understand. But Sameer? Talking to him had always been easy. And she knew he loved and appreciated his grandfather as much as she did, which just made it easier to talk to him about her past.

She sighed and put her plate down. “Anyway, let’s get to work?”

Sameer placed his fork on his plate and put it to the side. There was still so much of her he wanted to know about. But obviously right now wasn’t the time. So instead, he said, “Of course.”

After calling one of his staff to clear their dinner, Sameer led Raashi to his desk where he had laid out the architectural and design plans for the villa and its surrounding land. He explained the layout of the spa, how he planned to extend The Marquis and how her restaurant would be the main front of the property.

“What do you think?” Sameer asked, when he saw Raashi studying the drawings. She asked him several questions and argued over many points with him.

When she was satisfied, she finally said, “Looks good to me on paper, at least. Why don’t we meet at the site tomorrow morning and see all this again in daylight. It will give us a better understanding, don’t you think?”

“Definitely. How about I fetch you from home and we go from there together?”

Raashi nodded and then frowned as Sameer looked sheepishly at her. “What is it now?”

“Actually, I have a confession to make.”

Raashi looked at him pointedly.

“Well, I asked my architects to come up with a draft design for your restaurant, along with pictures and ideas. It’s a first cut, but it’s quite easy to envisage. You wanna see?”

Raashi didn't know whether she was angry with him or excited to actually see what he had envisioned for the restaurant. "Sameer, you had no right!" she said, but he caught the glimmer of excitement in her voice and went to the end of the desk, turning his laptop towards her.

"It's yours, Raashi. If you don't like it, you can trash the whole thing. You know you have a final say in everything regarding the restaurant."

Raashi went through the presentation. It was fantastic. Seeing a 3D demo of how her restaurant could actually look like was unbelievable. She was awestruck, impressed and speechless. It overwhelmed her to see her dream actually becoming a reality. Both of their dreams could be fulfilled.

She turned to Sameer. "Thanks. I can't tell you how touched I am by this," she said, pointing to the laptop screen. "It's more than perfect. It's something I've dreamt of for so long. I wish my grandmother was alive to see this."

Sameer was taken aback when her eyes clouded with emotion. He noticed a lone tear slipping out from the corner of her eye. He couldn't help himself, he leaned forward and caught it with his finger. She looked at him with stormy eyes and did something unexpected. She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. He gazed at her for a second and caught her waist, gently bringing her closer to him. So close, that she was crushed against his chest. And then he speared his hand through the heavy silkiness of her hair. He put his hand under her nape and brought her mouth closer to his own. She didn't hesitate one bit. She closed the remaining distance between their lips hurriedly and kissed him.

So very gently she teased his mouth with her own. Sameer let her do what she wanted with him. She was kissing him softly, sweetly. Little nips on his mouth that drove him wild with desire. He could feel her hands all over his back. She pushed herself closer to him. As her hand tugged at his shirt, moving under it and touched his skin, he knew he was lost. He held her more firmly against himself, feeling her soft breasts against his chest and kissed her desperately. This was what he wanted, since forever, he thought. She in his arms, his mouth entwining with hers, her hands on him. This felt right.

He kissed her hungrily, a meeting of tongue and lips and she was with him all the way. His hands were moving all over her, gently caressing the sides of her breasts, molding her hips, pulling her into him. She could feel the strength of his desire. His passionate response to her nearness delighted her.

Ever since he had heard of Rithwik Bali's marriage proposal to her, he had been insanely jealous. That another man coveted what was his, had shaken him. She was his. He had felt helpless before, but now with her in his arms, kissing him, he wanted to scream from the rooftops that she belonged to him.

Raashi felt as if she was in the centre of a raging inferno. Her body was alight, lit by a thousand flames. Everywhere Sameer touched seemed to come to life. She wanted him, here, right now and to hell with the consequences. This was where she belonged. Here, with him, loving him, letting him love her. She wanted more of him, more of his skin to touch. She lifted his shirt with her hands and undid his buttons. He pushed it off his chest. She stared at him. He was gorgeous. She touched him with both her hands, running her hands across the wide expanse of his chest and across the sharp edges of his abs. Raashi felt his breath catch. Feeling bolder, she planted her mouth on his chest and kissed him. Small kisses first from the center of his chest up to his chin and then down the side of his neck. She stayed there kissing him and then she bit him right at the base of his neck.

Sameer growled and pulled her close to him. He lifted her up in his arms and pushed the papers and the laptop from his desk to one side. Uncaring where, what fell, he gently laid her down and moved between her legs. He leaned on top of her and kissed her hungrily. She held him tight, kissing him back with the same intensity. Her tongue touched his and their mouths tangled. She ran her hands through his hair, down his back and felt him rock against her, right where she needed him. She felt dizzy with all the feelings going through her. She wanted him so much.

Sameer felt he was going insane as her mouth played havoc with his. He wanted more, so much more. He bent lower and lifted her top very slowly. Each part of her that he exposed, he kissed. He ran his tongue on her skin till she was squirming under him. He bunched her top up and saw that she was wearing a sexy, lacy, peach colored, bra.

"You're beautiful, Raashi," he said softly as he looked at her.

He was on fire. His body craved hers. He pushed himself more fiercely against her. She responded in kind, writhing against him, making him mad with desire. He put his hands on her breasts and cupped both of them. Holding one breast, he put his lips on it and flicked his tongue across the peak.

Raashi shuddered, he felt it and repeated the same thing again and again until she was begging him for more. When he finally pushed aside the lacy barrier and suckled on her breast, Raashi felt herself throb with pleasure. She held his head and brought it down to her other breast and Sameer gave her what she wanted.

“Please, Sameer, I want you. Right now,” Raashi whispered rocking against him.

Her words broke through the haze in his mind. He suddenly realized that they were in his office on his desk and anyone could walk in on them. He was going crazy. She had done this to him. And if he did this, now, if he made love to her on his desk, she would never forgive him for it. He glanced at her, as she lay in his arms panting, hungry for him. But, he also knew she would blame him later. It would always seem that he manipulated her to get her to come to his office. There was so much unspoken between them. If he gave in to his desire for her right now without first building trust between them, it would never work out. He was such a fool. No, he couldn't afford to let things go out of control. He gave her a final kiss on her stomach and then adjusted her clothes. Stepping away from her, he picked up his shirt and put it on hurriedly.

Raashi sensed his hesitation a second before he kissed her belly and stepped away from her. It felt like a jug of cold water was poured on her. She felt so vulnerable, exposed and stupid. She couldn't even imagine what would have happened had Sameer not stopped. They would be...

No, she was not going to think about this right now. This was embarrassing enough already. She got off the table and saw Sameer standing with his back to her, fixing his clothing. He was obviously giving her time to settle down. She ran a weary hand through her hair. This was crazy. She had lost control so quickly and so completely.

Sameer turned around, trying to control his breathing. He looked at her, her swollen lips, her hair all messed up, her breasts heaving, straining against her top, her breathing irregular. Looking at her, he felt like continuing from exactly where they had left off. She sure was a temptress and the tension between them was electric. But he didn't want to go there...he couldn't. With great effort he held himself back. He watched as she picked up her bag and wordlessly rushed out of his office.

He stood standing there for several minutes, reliving the entire evening.

He didn't regret what had happened between them, not one bit. This insanity between them was a given. After tonight she would also be unable to deny the direction they were headed in. The sooner she realized it the better. There was only one reason he had put a stop to tonight. Although her body was helpless to respond to his, her mind wasn't ready yet. This time, he did not want a quick fling with her. He wanted her in his bed for as long as it took for him to assuage this fanatical need he felt for her and to finally understand why, as each day passed, he felt that he couldn't live without her.

Picking up his phone he sent her a text telling her the time he would be meeting her tomorrow. They were to drive down to the villa in the morning and they hadn't gotten around to discussing that at all.

Taking a deep sigh, he picked up the papers that had fallen all over the floor and made a call to his architect. He was too agitated to go home. It was better to get some work done instead.

Raashi almost ran to her car. The minute she got in, she rested her head on the steering wheel. Oh God! What had she done? The things that she had let him do to her, the things she had done to him. She had been encouraging him, had done nothing to stop him. She put her hands over her face, disgusted with herself. How was she going to live this down?

Her phone beeped. She pulled it out of her purse and saw Sameer's brief text message telling her the time he would be coming over tomorrow to take her to the villa. She couldn't believe it. The whole thing hadn't affected him at all. He was already thinking of business while here she was, all befuddled and maddened. She realized how vulnerable she was to him. She had to find a way of protecting herself. If she had to work with him then she couldn't allow something like this to be repeated.

Their history was catastrophic. Them being in the same room alone was dangerous. Once again he had entered her orbit and he was not going to go away any time soon. She recalled all the times he had met her recently and went rigid in fury and turmoil. Natasha! Raashi called herself all kinds of names. She was not the type of woman who preyed on another woman's man. She was enraged with herself.

And what was Sameer doing toying with her again and again when he was thinking of marrying Natasha. Raashi wanted to scream loudly. She was so angry with him now.

Chapter 15

What happened last night was troubling her. He was sure of it. She hadn't spoken a word to him ever since she got into his car. The traffic was crazy, and it had been almost half an hour since they were stuck in it.

He had greeted her politely when she had entered the car. But his greeting was met by an almost imperceptible nod. And then she had proceeded to remain silent.

As the traffic began moving again, he gave her a quick sideways glance. She was still staring outside her own window, lost in thought. He was yearning to find out what was going on in her head. And if her silence continued like this, the drive to the villa would become insufferable. Suddenly, she turned her head towards him. He raised a single eyebrow to her in question. She turned her face away and looked straight ahead instead.

"You know it was a mistake, right?" she said, still not looking at him.

"What was?" Sameer asked.

Raashi turned to face him. "Don't make this difficult for me, Sameer." She took a deep breath and continued, "But if you want me to say it aloud, I sure will. Last night was a huge, terrible mistake."

Sameer looked ahead at the road, and then glanced at her briefly before concentrating on the fast moving traffic again.

"Which part?" he questioned casually.

"What?" Raashi asked in disbelief.

"I want to know which part you think was a mistake. When you melted in my arms, or when you were begging me to kiss your body or when I put a stop to it all? What exactly have you taken so much of an offence to?" Sameer threw a cool glance at her now flushed face.

"Damn you, Sameer! All of it! I took offence to all of it. It started with that kiss I gave on your cheek. I was just so overwhelmed, I wasn't thinking. I shouldn't have gone anywhere near you. But you couldn't resist, could you? It's all your fault."

Raashi refused to look at him directly as she made the statement. She sounded cold, she was angry and she wanted him to know it. But in all

honesty, he was not entirely to blame because she had done nothing to stop him. She had encouraged him, in fact. Although, that was not something she was going to accept, aloud. She had chastised herself enough during her long sleepless night.

It was just easier to put the blame on him. He was almost engaged to someone else. He had no business doing what he had done yesterday. She had to make it clear to him that it could never happen again.

Through the corner of his eyes Sameer saw her fiddling with her handbag, looking anywhere but at him. It was obvious from the dark smudges under her eyes that she had had a sleepless night. Good! He wanted to invade her dreams, her mind, every aspect of her life, till she was left with no choice but to let him in again. Let him into the closely guarded wall she had built around herself. His lips twitched as his mouth curved at the edges.

Raashi caught him smiling. Definitely, not the response she had expected. Furious, she said, "I am glad you find this situation amusing!"

Sameer chuckled at her sarcasm. "You're a hypocrite," he said casually, his eyes still on the road.

"I am not," Raashi said fuming.

"If you weren't, we wouldn't be having this conversation now, would we? You're just blaming me because you refuse to accept that you were very willing last night. You wanted me with as much passion as I wanted you and if I hadn't stopped when I did, you know we would have ended up making love on that table."

Raashi felt her face go red as he spoke.

"No, I would not have let it go that far," she said softly.

"Deny it as much as you want sweetheart, but you were with me all the way. You would never have stopped me last night. You can't help yourself when it comes to me. And believe me, the attraction is definitely mutual," he said pointedly.

Raashi was furious. She was angry that he had stated the absolute truth. She closed her eyes for some courage.

"I am not going to let you do this to me again, Sameer. The last time I fell for your charm, I ended up feeling used. This time I am stronger. So I am NOT going to give in to you no matter what happened between us last night."

Sameer did not answer back immediately. She was right. So he said the one thing that was long overdue. "I am sorry."

She jerked her head towards him looking puzzled. "You're apologizing for last night?"

"No, not last night. I am sorry about that other night, our first time together. I am sorry for hurting you. I shouldn't have left you that night. I should have stayed to see if the night could have led us to...well, something, maybe even a new beginning. But to be honest, I was just not prepared for you. The impact of you! That night was the most fulfilling night of my life. It was perfect. You were perfect, too perfect in fact, for someone like me," Sameer almost whispered the last few words with a pained expression on his handsome face.

Raashi shut her eyes tight. Ever since that night, she had been filled with doubts about herself. Now hearing him say those words seemed to take a weight off her chest.

Sameer continued. "I was emotionally broken before you came into my life. You made me feel again. Feelings that were buried so deep that I was afraid, and I did what I have always done, run. I ran away from you, away from probably what could have been the best thing in my life. It was a mistake. I should have stayed back and..."

Raashi cut him off before he could finish. "Stop. Please. Just stop." She shook her head. "Why? Why now? Why are you apologizing to me after all these months?"

"Raashi I..." but she cut him off again.

"Please, let this not be about the land. I am here, am I not? So, there is no obvious need for you to...", she said, holding her hand out in front of her.

He caught her hand in a tight grip. "There is every need. This has nothing to do with the land. This is about you and me. I want you in my life, Raashi. And I know, you feel the same. Let me do it right this time."

She tried to free her hand but he only gripped it tighter. She could feel the heat of his fingers on her skin, his thumb on the pulse point in the center of her wrist. She felt her pulse leap rapidly. His eyes moved from her face to her wrist and then to her face. He knew the effect he had on her, no matter how hard she denied it. His gaze smoldered, she saw his irises darken in answering need to the want she felt for him and then he blinked and turned

towards the road again.

He released her hand and placed his own hand back on the steering wheel. Swerving to the side of the road, he slowed the car and stopped on a side street. There was absolute silence between them, broken only by the low hum of the car engine. Sameer ran his hands through his hair. He shouldn't have touched her, it had been a mistake to touch her and assume that he wouldn't be affected by it. That she was also equally affected had been obvious, to him and to her. He turned to look at her sideways. She refused to look at him, preferring to stare ahead into the distance.

Raashi was speechless. This attraction between them was extremely intense and scary. And his side of the story had confused her already muddled emotions even more.

"Raashi," she heard him call out softly.

She pretended not to hear him, hoping that he would let it go. She shut her eyes tight, unwilling to answer. But, instead he said again, louder this time, "Raashi!"

Finally, taking a deep breath, she turned to him. "Yes."

"You know we have to sort out all this between us. Please hear me out."

"No, Sameer," Raashi said. "Just drop it. Frankly, I don't care anymore. All I want is that you do not touch me again, ever."

"I can't do that."

"For God's sake, Sameer, consider Natasha, you're dating her, thinking of marrying her. How can you be so heartless to commit to her and carry on with me too at the same time?" she asked bitterly.

"I am not going to marry her," Sameer looked straight in her eyes.

"Of course you are," Raashi was unable to believe him.

"No, Raashi, I am not. I broke it off with her, though I am not sure that is the correct word to use, since there was nothing really going on in the first place. But the fact is, it is all over between us. For good this time."

Raashi tried to deny the emotion of intense relief she was feeling at his words. For weeks now she had felt burdened by the unhappiness that haunted her whenever she thought of Sameer with Natasha and now suddenly she felt lighter.

She looked at him, into his eyes and realized that he was telling her the truth.

“Why?” she asked plainly.

“Because I realized that I don’t feel a thing for her. Not even one iota of what I feel for you.”

Raashi was shocked. “But Natasha and you were in a serious relationship in the past. In fact wasn’t she...I mean Natasha...she was the only woman you ever loved? I don’t understand.” Damn! She was mumbling like an idiot now. His latest declaration had shaken her up.

Noticing her discomfiture, Sameer knew he would need to clarify further. “Natasha and I were in a relationship many years ago. I was much younger then, I had different ideas in life. I thought I was in love with her and, maybe I was. She refused to marry me when I proposed to her back then and that left me emotionally scarred for a long time. This time around, it was not her but her father’s offer that attracted me. He offered to add their hotel chain to mine if I married her. I was definitely interested. I knew her and we had a history. I thought I could make it work with her. And then you waltzed back into my life. Gradually, it became clearer to me that she wasn’t right for me.”

Raashi gaped at him open mouthed. She couldn’t believe what he was telling her. The whole conversation seemed surreal.

“Sameer, I.... I really don’t know what to say. It’s just too much to handle,” Raashi said.

Sameer nodded and shifted the car into gear and sped forward. By mutual consent they didn’t discuss anything even remotely close to personal for the rest of the drive. Sameer had already laid most of the cards on the table and he understood that she needed time to think things through.

Run. That was the only word that kept playing in Raashi’s mind. Run, as far away and as fast as she could from him. She felt she should be heeding her own advice. But her heart was sorely tempted to give in to him. They had unfinished business, this maddening attraction, a need that had to be fulfilled. It could be so easy, especially now that she was sure he wasn’t seeing anyone. On the other hand the sane part of her told her to stay away, that she had to stop him at all cost from winning her heart again. She wouldn’t be able to survive a second betrayal from him.

A few minutes later he slowed down and brought the car to a halt in front

of the villa. Silently, he walked out and stood in front of the car. Raashi joined him.

“I can just imagine this place once your restaurant and my spa are finally built. It will be magnificent,” he said.

Raashi followed him as he entered the two-story run down villa, watching him as he walked with his laptop around the place and explained his plans to her. She listened to him as he animatedly described her dream to her. He had given it a lot of thought and had deliberated on minor details that she hadn’t even considered. She asked a few questions here and there, but she could visualize it all. And he could make it come true for her. All that she had to do was come on board and sign on the dotted line.

She followed him outside as they stood at the edge of the villa. He silently shuffled through the drawings till he found the one he was looking for. Wordlessly, his eyes moved back and forth from the drawings to The Marquis and back to the land on the further end. She wanted to know what he was thinking. She wanted to hear him speak about his dream.

She touched his arm. “I want to know your plans for the spa. Tell me, please.”

So he told her. He handed the laptop to her, showing her the drawings open on the screen. He explained the entire blueprint and looking in the distance, pointed out how the whole thing might possibly look like when it was constructed.

She watched him talk and describe in detail all the plans he had made. Till now, she hadn’t really understood the depth of his passion for his dream. She had always thought this was just another project for him. She had also in her head believed that he was staking claim on this land only to aggravate her. But now she saw how involved he was, how committed he was to turning his dream to reality. His love for this was clearly shining through and at that moment Raashi made up her mind to go along with his plans. It was apparent he was very strongly attached to this land and was willing to give up anything to make the project happen. Out of nowhere came a strong urge within her to give him his dream. To let him build it exactly the way he had imagined it.

Sameer caught her staring at him and paused. Seeing the land with the plans in his hand was overwhelming and he had been talking non-stop for an hour now. He had spoken about minor details, things that he had not even

discussed with the team yet. And Raashi had the power to turn it all into dust. If she rejected his proposal, this entire project would be over. Everything would end even before it began.

He walked back towards her. “We should be heading back. I have a meeting in a few hours and it will take us a while to return.”

Raashi looked at her watch and was surprised that it was past twelve in the afternoon. They had been here for more than two hours. Time had just flown by. Back in the car, the silence stretched between them.

Sameer knew that bringing Raashi here and showing her all the blueprints on the site was the only way he could possibly get her to agree to the plan he had in mind. However, she had been silent all along. She had listened to him but spoken very little. If she was against the project even after this visit today then that would mean that she failed to realize what this project meant to him. He hated to admit it but that would also mean the end of everything. There would be no hope for anything, not for his dream and not for them.

“Sameer,” she began. “I have made up my mind.”

Sameer felt his heart jump in anticipation of her next words.

“We’ll do it, together. But there is one thing. Two things actually.”

Wow! It was going to happen. All of it. She understood him, she knew how much this all meant to him.

“Raashi, you won’t regret this. I promise. It’s going to be so successful. I can see it happening. I...”

“Hang on, Sameer. I said there are two things.”

“What? Anything. Anything to make this happen.”

“First, I don’t want money for the land. Just build me the restaurant, that’s enough for me.”

Sameer was surprised.

“But...”

“No, Sameer. The land was yours to start with and I refuse to take money from you. I just want the restaurant, that’s it. So don’t give me a hard time on this.”

“Okay, I can accept that. What’s the other thing?”

“I want you to give me your word on something,” Raashi said softly.

Sameer narrowed his eyes at her words. What was she talking about?

“What do you want?”

“I want your word that you will not try to get close to me, touch me or even kiss me ever.” Raashi felt a slow pain in her heart as she said this. But there was no choice; she had to protect herself from him. She wasn’t going to let him hurt her again. She knew she was extremely vulnerable to him and once she let him in, he would take over her life completely. She wasn’t going to allow him to do that. Once was more than enough. She would be stupid to make the same mistake twice.

Sameer couldn’t believe what he had heard. For a second, he felt completely lost. She knew he wanted her but she had found a way to keep him away from her. He smiled. Hmm, that’s what she thought at least.

“Coward!” he said.

“Call it whatever you want. These are my terms. The choice is yours now.”

“In that case, I accept.”

“So you give me your word that you won’t...”

“Yes Raashi, you have my word, I will not touch you until you beg me to do so. But if you make the first move, then all deals are off,” he said cheekily.

“That will never happen,” Raashi said resolutely.

“Never say never, sweetheart.” He smiled at her brightly and she knew that this would be hard. His next words confirmed her fear. “What I like most about you, Raashi is that you never fail to challenge me and I can never resist a good challenge.”

Chapter 16

Sameer was pursuing her, again. And Raashi knew it. Ever since she had imposed the condition on him, he hadn't touched her, not once. They had met several times in the last two weeks in his office, mostly with his team of architects and designers. They were hardly ever alone and the times they were, he kept his part of the bargain. He behaved like a perfect gentleman. But he had a history with her, which meant that he knew how to attract her attention. He knew just the right place to whisper behind her ear that made her shudder. He knew exactly how to be close to her without touching her that would drive her wild.

Case in point yesterday, when she had bent over a drawing, he had deliberately leaned close to her, so close that they were just a breath apart. She had not missed the way his eyes had slowly traveled from her head to her eyes and then to her lips where his eyes had lingered making her heartbeat gallop and race. She had felt his heated stare like a caress.

And then there were those devastating smiles of his. He smiled at her frequently and each time that delicious cleft on his chin came into her view, she wanted to kiss it. It had been easy to tell him not to touch her but she was finding it harder and harder not to touch him, herself.

He was making her want him and she was going crazy. Meeting him so frequently, talking to him freely and comfortably, laughing with him; it was all making it difficult for her to resist him. Very slowly, he was working his way into her life and once again she was finding it challenging to keep him at bay.

And then the gifts started coming in. Random gifts, whenever he felt like it. And those notes that he sent. She found them irresistible.

The day after she had imposed the *no touch rule*, he had sent her a single white rose, with a note, to her office. It read, *A peace offering! Because from now on, you will know no peace until you're back in my arms and in my bed where you belong. Yours... Sameer.*

She had been restless the whole day after reading that note. She had held that rose longer than required and she had thought of him each time she saw it.

And then there was the day he had sent her a red velvet cup cake with the message, *Remember me, tasting your lips, when you bite into this. Have a nice day ;) Yours... Sameer.*

She had avoided eating that cake for an hour until she had given into temptation and dug into it. She had smiled even more after.

The third time he had sent her a shiny red, acoustic guitar with her name engraved on it. He had remembered that she didn't own a guitar anymore. Her heart had soared.

She had lifted the guitar from its case and immediately tuned it and played a few chords. And then she remembered the note. His note. She looked everywhere for it, but could not find it. There was no note.

She had sent him a text immediately. *No note today?*

So, you do wait for my notes? he had replied back.

She had sent him a 'rolling eyes' emoticon in answer.

He had responded with, *Admit it. You like my notes, you love my gifts and perhaps you like me too?*

Keep wishing! was her response. She was enjoying every second of this cat and mouse game they were playing.

Oh, I will. Every day, till you accept how much you like me.

She had kept silent for a minute and then had messaged him back.

I love the guitar. Thank you. And I do like you.

His reply came instantly, *I know Raashi, I know...*

Thereafter, he started messaging her regularly and frequently. He even called her everyday, sometimes at night, as well. Slowly and deliberately, he was weaving his way into her heart.

Raashi stopped her musings as her sister entered her office.

"So, no gift today?" Jiya asked her.

"No."

"Are you falling for Sameer Sehgal?" Jiya queried.

"No," Raashi said a tad bit too loudly. She was stunned by her sister's bold question.

Jiya raised a brow in obvious disbelief. She perched lightly on Raashi's

desk. “Oh, really? You’re thrilled when he sends you gifts. He calls you all the time and you’re smiling much more. Looks like you are falling for him.”

“No, I mean, I don’t know. It’s too much, too soon, Jee.”

“Are you afraid? Is that why you are playing hard to get?”.

God! Since when did her little sister become so perceptive?

Raashi nodded silently.

“Well, in my opinion, it’s fun to play ‘hard to get’ for a while. But he’s not going to wait forever. You need to make up your mind about Sameer Sehgal quickly.”

Raashi looked at her sister, “Where is my kid sister and what have you done to her?”

Jiya studied her carefully, “Someone needs to watch out for you and I need to be certain you’re not in over your head especially since I am planning to leave this week.”

Raashi walked to her sister and held her hands. “You’re leaving? Already? But there is still almost a month left of your break?”

“I know. But some of my friends are planning a beach holiday before our break ends and I want to go with them. Moreover, your assistant is back, so you really won’t need me at work.”

“Oh, Jee! I need you around. The house is not the same without you,” Raashi told her.

Jiya came closer and gave her a hug. “I know, but I really want to go with my friends. If you’re okay, I would like to leave mid-week.”

Raashi nodded in agreement, though inside she felt wrecked. Jiya was leaving and God only knew how many months she would have to wait to see her again. But she couldn’t stop her. That would be unfair. Her sister was a good kid and she deserved as much happiness as possible.

Chapter 17

The rains had set in Mumbai. It was a deluge outside, Sameer thought. The wind and rains were beating on the windows of the conference room. He stood at the conference table, staring at drawings in front of him, his thoughts again on Raashi.

In the last week, he had met Raashi on most evenings to discuss their projects. They were never alone and were always surrounded by his team, brainstorming various design ideas. She had asked him to be a part of these discussions. Initially, he had been pretty surprised by her request. But then he saw her actually paying attention to his inputs and making changes as per what he said. He realized that she genuinely respected his opinion, which made him feel great! He looked at his watch. It was five thirty in the evening. She would be here any moment now. He started gathering up the papers from the conference room table, where he had spent the last hour showing his plans to Kabier and Rishi.

Kabier stood up, “I have to say this, Sameer, your plan was brilliant! It worked out well for us and for Raashi obviously. Plus, she gave the land back to you for free.”

“I was ready to buy the land but Raashi didn’t want the money. It was never about the money. It was about letting her have a chance to fulfill her dream too. This was right for her,” Sameer stated casually.

Rishi jerked his head up from his laptop screen, “Since when do you care so much about Raashi? Why did you go out of the way to ensure it was ‘right’ for her?” he asked, air quoting his words.

When Sameer didn’t reply, Kabier asked concerned, “What’s going on, Sameer? You know you can talk to us.”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“Oh, come on! We saw the way you handled the land situation with Raashi. It was clear that you wanted to ensure she got what she wanted. We also heard that you have called it off with Natasha. And now you’ve been spending most evenings with Raashi helping her with her restaurant,” Kabier said.

Rishi continued, “So, please credit us with a little intelligence and tell us

what is actually going on.”

“That’s just it. Nothing is going on right now. We are just working together,” Sameer said flatly. He refused to tell his brother and cousin anything more because he couldn’t admit his feelings towards her, even to himself. Right now he wanted space to work things out with her.

He saw Kabier and Rishi exchange a look and then Rishi said, “Okay, but we are here when you are ready to talk.”

Sameer stood up and made a show of stacking up his papers silently.

“We are seeing you tomorrow night for Sheena’s party, right?” Kabier asked.

He nodded without looking up from the papers.

“Oh and Shauna is landing tonight. I am going to the airport to receive her. Are you coming with me?” Rishi asked.

Sameer’s phone beeped. It was Raashi messaging him that she was waiting in his office.

Sameer turned towards the door distractedly and left without responding. He didn’t see the look exchanged between his brother and his cousin. He hurried out of there looking forward to seeing her again, to spending time with her.

He heard her tinkling laugh even before he entered his office. He walked inside and shut the door leaning against it. She was sitting at his desk facing the glass windows, talking on her phone. She was completely engrossed with her call and hadn’t seen or heard him enter.

He was besotted with her. The way she walked, the way she talked, the way she rubbed her neck when she was tired. He had never wanted another woman as much and he was sure she felt the same for him too. Being with her and not touching her was making him ache. But he had given his word and he was waiting for her to make the next move.

They were finally comfortable in each other’s presence and she was back to being the old Raashi he knew, full of laughter and emotion. If only she would accept him into her life fully!

He continued to watch her as she carried on her side of the conversation. He narrowed his eyes when he heard her say, “Come on, Rithwik, I am not going to give you an answer, right now. Definitely not on the phone.”

And then she said, “Of course, I am thinking about it. It’s not like you don’t bring it up every time we talk.”

She was twirling her hair and then she pushed it aside agitatedly. “Can you stop this here?” he heard her say. “I need more time to think. It’s taken me a while to come to terms with the fact that you actually proposed to me. So stop with the pressure already.”

Sameer scowled and folded his arms as the implication of Raashi’s words hit him. He knew Rithwik had proposed to her and it was obvious that’s what they were discussing right now. The mere thought of Raashi and Rithwik together twisted a knife through him. It was just intolerable. He would never let it happen.

Raashi turned around in the midst of her conversation with Rithwik and was surprised to see Sameer leaning against his office door, watching her, obviously listening in on her conversation. Seeing him, she quickly ended the call and put her phone away.

She walked towards him, “Hey, when did you get here?”

Ignoring her question, Sameer walked closer to her, “Are you going to marry him?”

“Excuse me?” Raashi said.

“You heard me, Raashi, so don’t make me repeat it.”

Raashi looked at him. He was furious. She could see that in the way his brows furrowed as he anxiously waited for her to reply.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Raashi took a deep breath and replied, “It would be easy to marry Rithwik. He’s my friend and he cares for me. I’d be foolish not to consider it.”

Not that she had given much thought to Rithwik or his proposal ever since Sameer had come back into her life. But she wasn’t going to tell him that. He already was very close to destroying all her defenses against him. She wasn’t foolish to give him any more ammunition to break down all her remaining barriers.

Sameer was livid. “No! Absolutely not! You cannot consider it.”

Raashi's eyes widened at his audacity. "And you cannot dictate what I can or cannot do!"

"Oh, I can and I will. You will not consider marrying anyone until we resolve what's going on between us."

Raashi opened her mouth to say something but Sameer took a menacing step forward. She forgot what she was about to say and took a step back. He kept walking forward until he had backed her into the glass wall of his office. He was standing right in front of her, towering over her, crowding her in. She turned to the left to step aside but he placed his hand on the window by the side of her head, confining her. She turned to the other side but his other hand blocked her. He had caged her in, effectively blocking any means of her escape.

Raashi shut her eyes and when she opened them again, he was watching her.

He tilted his head to the side bringing his face close to hers. "Tell me, does being this close to him make your blood sing? Does being next to him and not touching him make you ache? Can he make you feel all that you are feeling right now?"

He knew, the damn man knew how he made her feel. Her heart skid and her pulse raced wildly. She couldn't think clearly.

"Sameer," she said breathless, "you promised not to touch me."

He chuckled softly. "Look again, sweetheart. Who's touching whom?"

Raashi's eyes widened in disbelief as she saw her own arms curled around his neck. Sameer's hands were on the glass wall. He wasn't touching her at all. She was touching him. God! She didn't even know when she had reached for him. He smiled wickedly at her. Her eyes went to the cleft of his that she had been dreaming about and without thinking leaned forward and put her tongue on it.

Sameer fought for a breath. Raashi was kissing his chin, licking the slight indent there. He let out a strangled sound as his blood heated and he struggled to keep his hands pinned on the glass wall. Her lips touched his softly, gently, but in the very next instant, she pushed him away and started collecting her things from his desk. He folded his hands and leaned against the wall watching her.

She turned to him. "I have to go."

"You didn't answer me."

She slowly backed towards his door wanting to escape.

He came forward and put his hands in his pockets. "Are you going to marry him?"

She looked at him for a second. "Maybe."

Raashi immediately turned and walked towards the door. She looked at him over her shoulder and said, "Maybe not." Then she grinned that beautiful, mischievous smile of hers and left him standing there, smiling in return.

Raashi smiled all the way to her car. Being close to him, teasing him, felt so good. She refused to make any sense of her reaction to him today. There was no point. She craved for him. It was plain and simple. There was no possibility of her moving on in life as long as he was invading her thoughts and dreams. Maybe what she actually needed was to have an affair with him, to get him off her mind. Hell! She was almost twenty-eight. If she wanted, she'd very well do it, but on her terms this time. If he wanted her then she would be willing but not for a one-night stand. She wanted more and she needed to see how far this thing between them could go.

As she readied herself for bed that night, her phone beeped. It was a text from Sameer.

"After today, all deals are off!! Sleep well."

Raashi knew she had changed the game when she had touched him. He had warned her and now he was going to come after her. She felt giddy with anticipation, delighted at that prospect. She was ready for him.

Chapter 18

Tonight was Sheena's party and Sameer was late. The annual hotel conference was being held at The Marquis and the hotel bustled with people. Hoteliers from all over the world came for this annual meet and the days were filled with conferences, workshops and banquets. Sameer was the keynote speaker today and hence he couldn't leave early. He checked his watch as soon as he had finished his presentation. It was past seven and even if he left for the party now, it would still take him two hours to reach Sheena's house considering the crazy Mumbai traffic.

Just as he exited the hotel, there was a tap on his shoulder. He turned and came face to face with Jiten Arya.

Sameer greeted him and shook hands with him. "You're a hard man to reach, Mr. Arya,"

"Well, these are busy times for us hoteliers as you surely know," the old man replied.

Sameer nodded and walked back inside the hotel. He guided Jiten Arya to an empty sofa in the lobby and sat across him. Ever since Sameer had ended things with Natasha he had been trying to get hold of her father. But the old man had always been unavailable. He had sought Sameer out today which meant that he wanted to talk.

It had been more than fifteen minutes now. Jiten Arya had spoken about everything under the sun but had steadfastly ignored the topic of Natasha and him. Sameer was losing patience. He was getting late.

He was looking forward to tonight. His brother, sisters, cousins and everyone near and dear would be there. And most importantly, she would be there too. He had taken her advice and changed his approach to Rhea and although his sister hadn't yet opened up to him, at least she didn't fight with him for everything. She was happier and seemed satisfied. He hoped his sister trusted him enough to confide in him soon. But thanks to Raashi, at least they had reached a better understanding with each other. Thus, tonight would be a real fun night.

After the last time in his office, he had made it clear to Raashi that he was coming after her. She belonged to him and he was going to claim her and

soon. And that started tonight.

“You haven’t been hearing a word I have spoken,” the older man suddenly said.

Sameer looked at him apologetically. “Oh, I am sorry. I am just preoccupied.”

Jiten Arya nodded. “I wonder where all your focus is these days. On the villa next to The Marquis or on the woman who owns the villa now?”

Sameer frowned.

Jiten Arya rubbed his chin slowly. “Of course, I have heard. I make it my business to know what’s happening in the life of my future son-in-law. I know you want the villa. I know you’re meeting the woman who owns the villa often. It just makes me wonder if the girl is now a threat to our previous agreement.”

Sameer’s eyes widened. “Are you spying on me?”

Jiten Arya took his time to reply. “I will always watch out for the interest of my daughter.”

Either Natasha hadn’t spoken to her father about their last conversation or the old man was deliberately playing this out to ferret out Sameer’s reaction and intention. Sameer would bet on the latter. Being in the business for so long, he knew the games people played. And therefore he needed to ensure that Arya understood once and for all where Sameer stood with his daughter.

“Mr. Arya, I was pretty clear to Natasha the last time I met her that nothing could happen between us and I am certain she has told you about it,” Sameer told the older man.

“My daughter considers it all a misunderstanding.”

“I meant it when I said it wasn’t going to work between us. She’s a great girl but she is not the one for me and I am definitely not the one for her. So, unfortunately I won’t be marrying her.”

“It’s quite surprising that the incentive of all the Arya Group Hotels hasn’t interested you enough to make it work with my daughter. Perhaps, you need time to rethink things through. I am also certain you wouldn’t want to antagonize me. Enemies especially in our business can be dangerous.”

Unbelievable, thought Sameer to himself. Infuriated at the older man’s words and tone, he said, “Look Mr. Arya, I don’t want your hotels nor do I

need to rethink anything. However, considering our past, I will choose to ignore your not so subtle threat for now and hope that you will let this go graciously. But, anyone who comes after me and mine will definitely face consequences and I have the weight of the entire Sehgal Corporation behind me.”

Sameer glared at him for a second, ensuring his message was well received and then he stood up and left.

Chapter 19

“Why are you two hovering around me? And why may I ask, have you left your husbands alone, all by themselves?” Raashi asked Keya and Sheena suspiciously. They had been by her side ever since she had entered Sheena’s party.

“Oh! We just want to spend time with you,” Keya stated simply and continued to converse with Sheena.

Raashi had seen the girls whispering in their husbands’ ears before they had drifted towards her. It was obvious they were itching to ask questions about Sameer and her. They had not brought up the topic as yet and she surely wasn’t going to be the one to bring it up. Not when she was confused as hell. She loved these girls, she really did, but telling them that she had decided to get involved with Sameer and then hearing them debate the pros and cons of what would happen next was not something she wanted right now. She listened to them quietly as they carried on about...she sighed as she realized she hadn’t been paying attention to what they were talking about.

Where was he? Every few minutes, Raashi found her eyes straying to the entrance waiting for him to make an appearance. His last text message to her had been three hours back. He should have been here a long time ago. As if on cue, Raashi saw Sameer enter. Her heart flipped in delight as their eyes met. As he strode in, a girl in a striking blue jumpsuit waylaid him. Raashi’s smile quickly turned into a worried frown as she recognized the beautiful girl. Natasha!

“Raashi, you are not paying us any attention,” Keya said.

Keya noticed Raashi staring at the entrance and turned to see what she was frowning at. “Hmm.”

Raashi reluctantly moved her eyes back to Keya, who raised her eyebrows in a silent question.

And then Sheena asked what Raashi was sure these two had been dying to ask her since the last half an hour. “Incidentally, not that we want to pry or anything, but how is it working out with Sameer?”

Raashi clenched her jaw in annoyance. Subtlety was surely not their strongest point.

“It’s been good. Very good, actually. I am enjoying myself thoroughly and I am so excited about the restaurant.”

Raashi had told them about her new venture with Sameer but had deliberately kept the personal aspect of her relationship with him away from them, hence their obvious curiosity.

Raashi saw both the girls watching her and then they replied in unison.

“I see,” said Sheena with a puckered brow.

“I see,” Keya said too, but with a smile.

She ignored them and then turned to look at Sameer. He was still chatting with Natasha, smiling at what she was saying and Raashi felt a pinch in the region of her heart.

“So tell us, has Sameer been treating you well?” Sheena was at her probing best. Raashi sighed, giving in to the inevitable and turned back to her friend. The girls had noticed her reaction to Sameer and Natasha talking.

“He’s great, Sheena. He’s been a huge support and I like working with him.”

Raashi glanced back at Sameer and saw Natasha touch his arm. She felt her anger flare.

“And?” Keya asked her, bringing her attention back to them.

“And he’s charming, witty and makes me laugh a lot,” Raashi replied without thinking, her attention still fixed on Sameer and Natasha.

“So, you like him?” Keya asked.

“Yes, I do,” Raashi replied absently.

“What are you going to do about it?” Keya asked her, this time pinching her arm. Raashi scowled at them.

“What is it?” she snapped.

“Can you stop gawking at my cousin and pay us some attention?” Sheena hissed, glowering at her.

Keya continued, “So, you like him. What’s next?”

“I never said I like him.”

Both of them looked daggers at her.

“You know what I think?” Keya began. “I think you need to live wildly

and see how this thing goes between you and Sameer. He's already told Kabier that he regrets not taking it forward the first time and I heard that you guys are getting along just great. So go with the flow."

Sheena shook her head vehemently. "No, Absolutely not. How can you even suggest such a thing, Keya? You were not there the last time when she broke to pieces after he left her."

Keya was angry now. Raashi could see that. "He made a mistake, Sheena," Keya said. "Are you going to hold it against him forever?"

"Maybe, yes," Sheena replied back indignantly. "She needs to think seriously about Rithwik's offer and marry him and be done with my cousin once and for all."

"You are mad to even suggest that she marry Rithwik," Keya retorted.

Raashi looked at the two of them fighting and gripped each of their hands. "Stop it, please. I cannot bear to see the two of you fighting because of me."

"I don't want you to be hurt again," Sheena said.

"And I don't want you to make the worst decision of your life because you were scared. I know you and I know you are afraid to give him a second chance."

Raashi squeezed both their hands in warning. "Enough, really. I know you two love me and that's why you are so protective. But, please give me an opportunity to make up my own mind, will you?"

Raashi looked at both of them and waited for them to nod their acceptance. She knew Sheena wanted to say more but her husband called out to her, effectively, cutting short the heated exchange.

As Sheena walked away with a, "This is so not over," Raashi turned back to look at Sameer who was still busy talking to Natasha. He was dressed in all black today. Black jacket and trousers and a black collared shirt opened at the neck. He looked fabulous and it annoyed her seeing him with that woman. And then she saw him take Natasha's hands in his. Now she was plain furious.

"He is very good looking, isn't he?" Keya noted from beside her. "I know you still have feelings for him, Raashi. I can see the way you look at him. You haven't stopped looking at him since he came. And it is obvious, seeing him with Natasha is bothering you."

Raashi couldn't think of a reply. Her anger was simmering. She almost walked up to interrupt Sameer and Natasha, but Rithwik called out to her. She saw him greet Keya. Then he came towards her and asked her to come with him. He wanted to talk to her. She hesitated for a moment but Sameer was still chatting with Natasha, so she left Keya chatting with a guest and followed Rithwik as he led her to a corner, a little away from the party.

Chapter 20

Sameer walked towards Raashi, smiling. She pulled him like gravity. His eyes had zeroed in on her as soon as he had entered. She was wearing a red, sleeveless flowing gown, her hair hanging loose. Her lips were painted a deep red. She looked stunning. He couldn't wait to be with her. His smile froze as Natasha stepped in front of him blocking his path.

"That look on your face says that you didn't expect me to be here," Natasha said cheerfully.

"Sorry! Guilty as charged," he replied in the same vein.

"I had hoped that because Sheena invited me here, it meant that you wanted me to be here."

Sameer watched her brush a strand of her hair away from her face. She was beautiful in a Goddess sort of way. Everything about her was right, the right clothes, the right accessories and the right make-up and hair-do. She was too perfect, though she most definitely did not make his heart flutter.

"You are welcome here, you know that. But..." Before Sameer could finish Natasha cut in, "But you didn't ask her to invite me."

Sameer kept silent. He didn't know what to tell her. He let out an exasperated sigh. First, that conversation with her father and now this. He definitely was not ready for a confrontation. Nonetheless, he decided to hear her out. He had to end this here and now.

"The last time in the car, I had hoped that it was just a fight. I thought you didn't mean it when you said it was over between us. I left you alone thinking you would need time to cool off. I received Sheena's invite a couple of days back and I thought that you must have asked her to invite me."

"Natasha..."

She touched his arm to stop what he was saying.

"Sameer, you actually never gave us a chance this time. I know I can be demanding at times; but you never cared about all that before. You've changed now, Sameer. I've seen you get annoyed with me, more than once. And that's not all. There was no physical intimacy between us. Every time we were out together, I hoped you would take it further but you never did. I

always returned feeling like there was something wrong with me. I tried to get close to you, several times, but you never took the hint,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

Sameer leaned forward and took both her hands in his.

“Natasha, you are lovely and you don’t have to try hard to get me or anyone else. You will find the right guy one day. But I just know that guy isn’t me.”

When she shook her head, he squeezed her hands tighter and asked, “Look into your heart. The last few weeks that we haven’t met, did your life come to a standstill? Did you feel like a part of you was missing?”

He could see the question had startled her. When a few moments had passed and she still hadn’t replied, he nudged her gently. “Hey, you’re not allowed so much time to answer.”

She smiled sheepishly and he realized he had succeeded in making her see sense.

“You and I were a mistake, Natasha, we were never meant to be together. If we were, then we would never have broken up the first time. I was merely a good bet for marriage. More like a good business prospect than a life partner.”

“Very well! I get your point. You’re right, you were a safe bet for me. I understand what you’re trying to say,” Natasha pouted cheekily. “One day, Mr. Sehgal, you may just regret letting go of me and then I may not want you back!”

Sameer beamed at her, glad that he had been able to clear it all with her without hurting her.

Natasha squeezed his hands. “You’re a great guy and I hope we can still be friends, in spite of this.”

“Always,” Sameer said, releasing her hands. He looked at Raashi and found her talking to Keya.

Natasha turned to see who had snagged his attention.

“It’s always been her, isn’t it? Raashi? She’s the one for you, right?” she asked.

Sameer turned back to Natasha.

Natasha continued, “I don’t know what your past with her was, but I do know that the moment your eyes met hers that night at AquaNox, something changed. You were always different whenever she was around. As if all your focus was pinned on her. You looked smitten. I refused to accept it earlier but now I do.”

Sameer nodded. “It’s always been her. It will always be only her. I let her go once, but never again.”

Natasha came closer and gave him a kiss on his cheek, hugging him tight. “In that case, I am happy for you. You deserve this joy.”

He held her close to him, thankful that it had ended peacefully between them. He turned to look for Raashi and couldn’t find her where he saw her last. He looked around and found her in a corner of the lawn staring at him and Natasha. A look of hurt crossed her face. A moment later her expression changed to pure rage. She turned her head and said something to Rithwik Bali. When did Rithwik whisk her away to a corner and for what? The next minute he had his answer. Bloody hell. Leaving Natasha, he rushed towards Raashi.

Chapter 21

“Aren’t you looking gorgeous today?” Rithwik took a turn around her playfully. Then he paused in front of her. “I like it very much.”

Raashi laughed as he touched her earring.

“So where have you been, Raashi? You’ve avoided going out with me for a while now,” Rithwik complained.

“I have just been busy at work.”

“With work or with Sameer Sehgal?” Rithwik asked point-blank.

“You know we are working together,” Raashi said.

“Are you sure that’s it?”

“Yes, now what exactly did you want to talk about?” Raashi asked, desperately wanting a change in subject. Her feelings for Sameer were too new and too raw to discuss with Rithwik.

“Well, my father is refusing to budge an inch on his marriage ultimatum. I spoke to him again but it’s of no use. Have you given any thought to my proposal?”

“No,” she replied honestly.

“Why not, Raashi? I don’t need to reiterate how good we can be together. We’ve been friends forever, we know each other very well and the last months we’ve connected much better than before. I am not seeing anyone else and you also claim that you are not. I think that’s quite a lot to get us going.”

“But...”

She couldn’t marry Rithwik especially now when she had all these feelings for Sameer that she hadn’t yet sorted out. She knew what these feelings were but she wasn’t ready to accept them yet. Not even to herself.

Her eyes automatically flitted to Sameer and what she saw left her shocked. She saw Natasha lean forward to kiss his cheek and then hug him. And Sameer hugged her back. His arms were around her waist and Natasha had her arms around his back, her head on his shoulder.

If he was indeed not with Natasha like he had her believe then why was he

holding her so tight? She was crazy to have believed everything that came out of his deceitful mouth. She saw him turn to look at her. Their eyes met. Her eyes flashed ire, declaring war.

She turned to Rithwik. "Kiss me!"

"What?" It was his turn to look shocked.

"You heard what I said. You want to marry me, right? If I agree, we'd get around to kissing sometime. Well then, do it now."

"But we've never..."

"I said now," Raashi repeated forcefully.

"Now?" Rithwik asked again, clearly taken aback.

"Yes, kiss me and show me that you mean it."

"OK," he said and moved closer to her. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him. Raashi watched him. He looked unsure as if he was still convincing himself to kiss her. Slowly, he leaned forward. His lips hesitated over hers, still deciding. Their mouths were less than an inch apart when Raashi realized this was wrong. She couldn't go through with it. She turned her face just as Rithwik's lips descended and met with her cheek instead.

Sameer walked towards Raashi hurriedly. His eyes widened in disbelief. Rithwik was going to kiss Raashi, right in front of him and she was allowing it. And then he saw her turn her face away, the kiss landing on her cheek instead. The vice around his heart loosened slightly, but his anger did not fade. Another man still had his arms around her, his mouth on her cheek. He felt disgusted. She had deliberately done this to annoy him. Well, she had succeeded. His head was pounding. Blast the woman for making him stark, raving mad. He was absolutely livid with her right now.

The moment his lips met her cheek, Rithwik whispered, "Oh, Thank God!"

Finally, still holding her, he moved slightly away. She looked into his eyes and said regretfully, "I'm sorry."

"No, please don't apologize. It is I who should apologize. It was as if I was violating some sacred code of friendship. You are a beautiful woman, don't get me wrong, but I have to be honest, it made me feel sick," he said

distastefully.

“This does mean that you have to stop forcing this marriage on me,” Raashi told him.

“After this, no way! You’re too special to me and I do really care for you. I was a fool to think that our friendship could be the basis for a successful marriage.” He winced.

Raashi nodded once.

“By the way, was that kiss just to prove a point to me or to someone else?” he asked her honestly. “Because Sameer Sehgal is headed this way and it looks like he is ready to murder me.”

Raashi saw Sameer walking towards them and heard Rithwik whisper, “I never stood a chance, did I?”

Raashi was unable to reply to him. She stepped out of Rithwik’s arms and turned slightly, coming face to face with Sameer. They stared at each other, each one fuming silently.

He was furious, she thought. Well, so was she. Whom she kissed and what she did was none of his business. After witnessing the spectacle he had made with Natasha, he had no right to question her.

After several seconds of terse silence, Sameer said, “We are leaving, now.”

“You can go right ahead. I am staying,” Raashi retorted.

“You are leaving with me.”

“Hey, she said she doesn’t want to go,” Rithwik added from the side.

Sameer gave him a murderous look. “Stay out of it, Rithwik. This is between me and her.”

“Not from where I see it,” Rithwik countered.

Sameer came forward and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. Rithwik leaned into Sameer unwilling to back down.

Raashi stepped in between them and separated them, pushing them apart.

“Stop it, both of you.” She turned to Sameer angrily. “Stop creating a scene.”

“I am not the one who created this scene,” Sameer yelled.

Raashi's head was throbbing. She couldn't handle this nonsense.

"You wanted to leave, right? Let's go then." When Rithwik started to say something, she stopped him. "I'll be fine."

Sameer glowered at Rithwik. He held Raashi's elbow and dragged her with him towards the car. She tried to shrug him off, but he held on even more firmly. When she protested, he just ignored her and kept walking straight to the car.

From another corner of the lawn, Kabier and Rishi had witnessed the entire incident.

"I cannot believe this. What's gotten into Sameer?" Kabier remarked in disbelief. He gestured with his hand at the scene that had just ended in front of them.

"Yes," Rishi said. "My normally calm and collected brother almost got into a fight in the middle of a party. It's about time he staked his claim."

"After this, I bet we'll be hearing of a marriage proposal soon."

Rishi nodded. Thinking aloud, he said, "I am sure he's dealing with these obviously intense feelings for Raashi. Feelings he won't admit or is unwilling to accept to himself. So the marriage proposal is definitely a sure shot thing. But I'll give him more time to come around. I bet you five thousand bucks on Sameer proposing marriage to Raashi in less than two months."

"Ten thousand and I'll make it a month," Kabier said, shaking hands with him.

Rishi gave a hoot of laughter. "This is just the beginning and believe me, I am going to enjoy every bit of this. The bet is on," Rishi said, pleased with the entire situation.

"What bet?" Kabier heard his wife Keya speak up from behind him. He turned to look at her. She was glowing in her pregnancy, simply lovely, he thought. He just couldn't stop the rush of emotion that engulfed him each time he looked at her.

"Hey, sweetheart!" Kabier said, "It's nothing. How are you feeling?"

Keya linked her arm with his. "I am fine, Kabier. You've asked me that at least five times already since we arrived."

Kabier drew her closer to him. "I worry about you and the baby."

“I know,” she replied warmly. Kabier had become obsessed with her wellbeing since he had heard she was pregnant. But she loved him for it. Looking at him now, she couldn’t believe how blessed she was. He was a great husband and would be an awesome father.

“So what were you boys betting on?” Keya asked both of them. Kabier related to her what had happened. She smiled. “Make it twenty and I bet a fortnight!”

“Works for me,” quipped Rishi.

Chapter 22

They drove in silence, the anger simmering between them. Sameer drove like a maniac, the car tires squealing at every turn. When he narrowly missed colliding with a bus, Raashi couldn't take it anymore. "Either slow down and drive like a normal person or stop the car and let me go home by myself."

He glared at her, but did slow down for the remainder of the drive.

Finally, he swerved the car to a stop outside her apartment complex.

"Why, Raashi? What is going on between you and Rithwik? Are you marrying him? Is that what that kiss was about?"

"How dare you?" she replied angrily "You have no right to question me about Rithwik when there is still something going on between Natasha and you. I was a fool to believe you when you said it was over between you and her." She unclasped her seat belt and got out of the car.

Raashi immediately headed to her building. As she entered the lift, Sameer followed her inside.

"You are not coming home with me," she said.

"Try and stop me," he replied furiously.

"Fine, whatever." She unlocked the door to her house and walked in with him close behind.

"Say what you have to say and be gone from here. I want you out of my house," Raashi said rudely after turning on the living room light.

"So you saw me hug Natasha and thought the worst of me?" Sameer asked her.

"I know what I saw. You told me weeks ago that it was over between you two and yet she was in your arms tonight. What am I to believe?"

"Why do you care? You always have Rithwik to fall back upon, don't you?"

"I am not explaining myself to you," Raashi said coldly turning her face away from him.

"Alright, I have something going on with Natasha and you have something going on with Rithwik. Now let's see if you remember what we

have going on between us.”

Saying that he moved forward, caught her waist and hauled her up into his arms. He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her furiously.

Caught by him in his arms and lifted off the ground, Raashi barely realized what was happening before his mouth swooped down on hers. He was angry, she knew that, but well, so was she. No way was she going to let him dominate her this way. She caught his face in her hands and kissed him back.

What had meant to be a punishing kiss changed its tenor the moment their lips met and he realized that instead of resisting him like he expected her to, she was kissing him back with as much passion as he was kissing her.

And just like that, he forgot why they were fighting and that he was angry with her. He could only feel the pleasure of having her in his arms again. She was pressing closer to him, her soft mouth responding to the pressure of his own. Her soft scent enveloped him, making him dizzy with need.

Raashi didn't even think to resist. She had been dreaming of being in his arms, of being held by him like this for so long that she forgot everything. Every sane thought she possessed crumbled to dust the minute he drew her to him. She needed him, wanted him in a way that was unexplainable and indefinable. She had longed for him for weeks, months to be honest. So she gave herself completely into the kiss and kissed him back with all the pent up desire that she felt for him.

He broke the kiss and slowly brought her down the length of his body, so slowly that she could feel every inch of him. So slowly, that she could feel the telltale sign of him being out of control and she reveled in the fact that she was the one making him hard with desire for her.

He kissed her on the side of her neck, nipping her where her pulse was beating strong and fast. His hands skimmed the sides of her waist and then caressed the sides of her breasts before moving back to her waist again. He gathered the long skirts of her dress, lifted them and put his hands on her bare waist, caressing her skin. Raashi gave in to the pleasure. She shuddered. He felt it and knew she was with him, wanting him as much as he wanted her.

It had always been like this between them. Their relationship had never been a slow burn. It was downright fiery with fireworks exploding when they were together like this.

However, before he took this further he wanted to clear the air between them. But he couldn't think with his hands on her skin. Reluctantly, he brought his hands back to her arms and held her gently.

"It's only been you, Raashi." He kissed her cheek and then her mouth softly. Between kisses, he whispered, "Ever since you came into my life, there has been no one else, just you. Tonight, it was just about closing the chapter with Natasha forever. It was a goodbye, nothing else."

His words were like a balm to her soul. Her heart swelled with happiness. She ran a hand lovingly through his hair. "I am not marrying Rithwik. I could never marry him. I asked him to kiss me because I was upset with you. I couldn't even go through with it. I just lost it when I saw you with Natasha. The thought of another woman in your arms makes me mad and insanely jealous and I just acted terribly."

"Why?" he asked her softly.

She watched him wait for her reply. She could give him some inconsequential answer and be done with the conversation or she could tell him the truth. In a heartbeat, she chose the latter. She was done being dishonest to herself about what she felt for him and she wasn't going to be dishonest with him either. What he chose to make of her confession and how he would react was for later. Right now was the time for honesty. So, she told him what was in her heart.

"Because of you. Because I love you. Because you are mine and only mine. Because, being with you, being around you and feeling you is all I long for."

Sameer stared at her. She was all that was perfect and she was his. Seeing Rithwik reach out to kiss her had been one of the most devastating moments of his life. At that moment, he knew. He knew his heart belonged to her.

Holding her face in his hands, he said softly, "I only want you. Just you. No moment in my life is right without you in it. You own me. I have needed you for so long and now that I have you, I am never going to let you go. Know this, Raashi, you are mine and I will keep you forever. I love you."

Raashi felt a torrent of emotions envelope her. The most profound being joy. She had loved him for so long and to have that love returned was the most wondrous and joyous feeling in the world. She had laid her heart bare before him and now she knew what lay in his heart as well.

Raashi leaned in a little closer, her eyes never leaving Sameer's. "Don't you dare walk away again?"

"Never again," he promised.

She smiled that sweet, sexy smile of hers that could bring him to his knees and brought his head down to hers. Their mouths met and the fireworks started anew. The kiss turned hot and then wild. It burned through his senses. It made his blood roar inside of him and pulse through his veins. She was everything he had ever dreamed of. She was all that he ever wanted. The soft curve of her mouth, the melting heat of her tongue, everything about her drove him mad.

Raashi knew what she desired and she knew, only he could give it to her. She ached for him. Without moving her mouth from his, she reached across his shoulders and struggled to push his jacket off him. He helped her shrug it off. As she began unbuttoning his shirt, he unzipped her gown, while the kiss raged between them. They left a trail of clothes all the way to her bed.

She gasped in pure pleasure as she felt him on top of her. Her legs entangled with his. She slid her palms over his bare chest and biceps, clutching at his shoulders, digging her fingernails into his flesh. His muscles flexed under her fingers. She pulled his mouth to hers but Sameer had something else in mind. He cupped her breasts and caressed them. He dragged his tongue across one nipple and watched her surrender to him.

Raashi grew delirious with ecstasy as he paid homage to her body. He squeezed her breast with his fingers and then slowly dragged his wet tongue across the peak. Her mind spun as pleasure racked her body in waves. He was tormenting her senses. He accorded the same attention to her other breast where his mouth stayed. He took the entire breast in his mouth and sucked on it. Raashi grew mindless with desire, all her pent-up love for him rising to the fore.

His mouth still on her breast, Sameer lowered his other hand, caressing her stomach, her navel and then he found that one spot on her body that made her tremble. He entered her core first with one finger and then with two, increasing the pressure. He felt her moan and shudder as his fingers flexed in and out of her body and his mouth continued to suckle on her breast. Seeing her like this was driving him utterly insane but he had to see her lose control before he sought his own pleasure. He pressed his fingers deeper into her and watched her come undone.

She was spinning out of control. Her mind raced as her blood pounded heavily through her veins and her body rose to the demand of his fingers. The heat of his mouth and the pressure of his fingers increased and the world tilted as she shattered.

Sameer did not wait for her to come down from her high. He swooped in and kissed her again, releasing her only for a few brief moments to don the necessary protection and then he entered her hot, wet core. She gasped out loud at the overwhelming sensation of him inside her. He linked his hands with hers and lifted their joined hands over her head as he surged inside her, his mouth on hers kissing her frantically.

He was losing his mind. Nothing existed in this moment, except her. He filled her soft body with increased urgency as he raced towards completion.

Raashi wrapped her legs around him as he pushed into her, reigniting the fire within her. She heard his labored breaths, felt his hands as they bore into hers and knew he was with her all the way. The heat kept building as his tempo increased, tightening every muscle inside her. She held onto him as her world spun. Her head fell back as sensation slammed through her and then she fell and fell, through an abyss of light and darkness and stars and the sun.

Feeling her dissolve around him destroyed his control. Instinct took over as he pounded into her and then his mind blanked out. White light flashed behind his closed eyes as he surrendered himself completely to her.

An eon later Sameer moved from her and gathered her in his arms. Raashi felt boneless as he held her close. She wrapped her arms around him to keep him from moving away. She laid her head on his chest and listened to the thud of his heart under her ear. As his heart rate slowed and steadied, she felt herself drift off to sleep.

Sameer kissed the top of her head and pulled the sheet around them, hugging her close and fell asleep himself.

Sameer woke up to the smell of coffee. He opened his eyes and found Raashi standing beside the bed, watching him, a mug in her hand.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said, rising up and leaning against the headboard. “You’re up early.” He ran his eyes over her. She was freshly showered and dressed in yoga pants and a loose t-shirt.

Her eyes roamed over his bare chest and arms, taking him in. He looked so good in her bed, all tousled up, jaw darkened with an overnight shadow and his hair a ruffled mess. She ran her hand through his hair, arranging it. She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his lips.

“Good morning,” she said, placing the steaming mug of coffee on the nightstand next to him. Sameer tugged her hand and she fell onto his lap. She put her arms around him and snuggled closer to him.

“Now, it’s a great morning indeed,” he said.

Raashi rested her head on his shoulder as he drank a sip of the hot liquid, sighing in bliss.

Sameer finished the coffee and picked up his phone, checking the time. “Shoot, it’s eight thirty. I need to go home.”

“Not yet,” Raashi said burrowing into him further. “This feels good right now. You and me finally like this.”

She straddled him and kissed him softly on his cheek. Her hands caressed his chest as she peppered soft kisses from below his ear to his neck, down to his shoulder, lingering there. His head fell back and his eyes closed as she proceeded to slowly destroy his mind. And then she moved lower and kissed the center of his chest. Sameer dragged her mouth to his. Their lips met and her tongue played with his. His hands moved under her t-shirt, pulling her closer to him. He was lost in the heat of her desire and his. She moved over him, rubbing against him.

“God, Raashi! You drive me crazy,” Sameer told her as he pinned her down, quickly shifting on top of her. Her clothes came off swiftly and then he slid deep inside her driving them both to pure ecstasy.

Chapter 23

Sameer opened the door to his home and walked straight into his mom, dad and sisters at the dining table, eating breakfast. There was a sudden pause in their conversation as they saw him. He looked at his watch and groaned. It was eleven in the morning on a Sunday. Obviously, his family would be at the breakfast table and here he was in last night's clothes, his jacket swung over his arm and Raashi's soft scent draped over him.

He saw his sisters assess him from top to bottom. Then, they exchanged a very obvious knowing look. God! He never did stuff like this in front of them. Hell, he had never stayed the whole night with any woman prior to this. He would always return home no matter how late in the night it was. But now he wanted to spend all his days and nights with Raashi. Leaving her this morning had been so hard. In the end, he had stayed for breakfast with a promise to meet her after an hour.

During breakfast they had discussed how to tackle their friends and family. Keya and Sheena had been calling her incessantly but she had chosen to ignore their calls. Both Sameer and Raashi wanted to keep themselves a secret for a while. They had found each other after so long that they wanted to simply be alone without the need to answer questions posed by anyone.

Sameer brought his mind back to the present where four pairs of eyes were watching him carefully.

He walked up to his sisters and kissed the tops of their heads. He grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl.

"Are you just returning home?" His mom finally asked him.

He nodded in reply.

Sameer saw his father raise his eyebrows and give him a smile, clearly understanding the situation for what it was. He then pretended to lose interest in the conversation as he picked up the newspaper in front of him.

"You partying so late these days?" His mom asked him looking up at the clock.

"Where were you last night?" Shauna probed before he could reply to his mother.

“Yeah,” Rhea said. “You came late to Sheena’s party. We saw you. And then you disappeared and no one knew...”

Shauna interrupted her twin. “Correction! Kabier and Rishi obviously knew but they spoke over and around the topic as usual when we asked them.”

Sameer remained silent, biting into the apple, refusing to reply.

“See,” Shauna said, “they only answer us with silence when they don’t want to tell us something.”

“Exactly,” Rhea continued. “I hate it when they behave like that. ”

Sameer waved at them nonchalantly and turned to leave.

“Breakfast?” His mom asked.

“Already eaten,” he replied, bouncing the apple in the air as he went to his room. In fifteen minutes he had showered and was ready. He left home immediately.

As the door shut behind him, Rita Sehgal turned to her husband, Jai, shocked. “Did he just leave again?”

“Looks that way,” Jai Sehgal replied, continuing to read his paper.

“What is going on with him?”

“Really, Mom? You are a mother of two sons and you don’t understand what’s going on?” Shauna threw her hands in the air dramatically.

“Duh, mom! He obviously spent the night with...you know...someone,” said Rhea.

Okay, Rita Sehgal thought. She knew both her sons were good looking and had a string of girls following them. But Sameer was not the type to flaunt his relationships. He always came home, even if it was very late at night. This was the first time he was walking in home at eleven in the morning. Did that mean he was serious about some girl now? She had to find out.

“I didn’t know he’s seeing someone. I thought he called it off with Natasha. Is there someone new in his life?” Rita asked, looking confused.

“Only one way to find out, mom,” Shauna mischievously pointed her finger upwards, her eyes dancing in glee.

“You girls should really leave those boys alone. You are forever stepping

in where it's not needed," Jai Sehgal said, folding his paper.

"Duh! No dad. They're the ones who are always meddling in our business, so the one time we get to interfere in theirs, we are not going to let it go," Rhea said cheekily. "Come on, mom! Let's go get answers from the one person who will surely know."

Jai Sehgal sighed. If the women thought they would get answers from his younger son about the older one, they were utterly mistaken. His boys were close and they were thick as thieves. Neither would tell on the other. It had been the same way since they were kids and now wouldn't be any different. He reluctantly followed the women of his house as they headed upstairs.

Rishi woke up to loud banging on his door.

"Go away! I need more sleep," he yelled.

The knocking on his door increased. He groaned loudly, putting a pillow on his head. He heard one of his sisters say, "Come on! Let us in. We need to talk."

"I hate you two. Go back to London and let me sleep in peace. I returned home at six in the morning."

He heard his sisters giggling. And then he heard his mother speak, "Well, at least one of my sons had the decency to return home." That woke him up. If Sameer didn't come home last night, then it meant only one thing.

"Come on, Rishi, we need to talk," his mother said.

Rishi sat up immediately and ran a tired hand across his face.

"Alright, wait," he grumbled, getting off the bed to open the door.

His mom walked in, followed by his sisters and his father. He saw them settle comfortably in his room. His dad sat on the couch, Rhea on the dresser and Shauna on the edge of his bed. His mom however chose to stand.

"Are we having a family meeting in my room, now?" he asked them sarcastically.

"Yes," his sisters said in unison, sounding very chirpy.

Rishi narrowed his eyes at them. "You two seem too happy right now, which means either Sameer is in trouble or I am. And since I am here and he's not, I am presuming it's him. So what is going on?"

His mom glared at him. "Sameer didn't come home last night."

A small smile played on his lips. About time his big brother got his life in order. Raashi was great for Sameer and he was happy that they were finally together. He saw his sisters eyeing him and he quickly straightened his face. With a bored look, he remarked, "That's strange, isn't it?"

His sisters scowled at him.

"And he left again in fifteen minutes," his mom said.

Rishi stretched his arms above his head, yawning. "Something must have come up. I am sure it's nothing to worry about."

"Who is she?" Shauna asked.

Rishi turned to her. "Am I supposed to understand that question?"

"Don't play dumb with us. We know you know what's going on with Sameer, so, who's the girl he's with?" Rhea asked from behind him.

"I am not saying anything to you at all."

"See, he does know who Sameer is seeing," Rhea stated.

Rishi folded his arms across his chest refusing to reply.

His father put a hand on his shoulder. "Do we need to be worried?"

"Not at all," he told his father in all seriousness.

"Is she..." his mom started to ask a question but Rishi raised his hand interrupting her.

"Please, mom. I can't. He will tell you when he is ready."

"Well, ladies! I think you got what you came for. So, let's leave the boy alone now," Jai Sehgal said and ushered his women out of his younger son's room. Rita Sehgal turned to Rishi. She still had a concerned look on her face and looked at her younger son pleadingly for answers. But Rishi remained silent. Rhea and Shauna left the room giving him a sideward glance.

"We will find out," Shauna told him on her way out.

Rishi shut his door and locked it. He was happy and excited about Sameer and Raashi. But, knowing his mother and sisters, Sameer would have to tell them soon. They were inquisitive and interfering. And once they suspected a woman was involved in Sameer's life, they wouldn't rest till they found out who it was. He yawned and fell back on his bed falling asleep in seconds.

Chapter 24

The past few days had been utter bliss. Raashi had never been happier in life. She was so much in love. Sameer was warm and sweet and so much fun to be around. He showed her that he loved her in more ways than one. He listened to her, sought her advice on so many things and heard her out when she had a rough day at work. He was just perfect.

Her days began and ended with him. They had settled into a comfortable routine, leaving each other only to go to work. Sameer spent most evenings with her at her home and several mornings she had woken up in his arms. Life was great, in every way she had ever imagined and more.

Raashi watched Sameer as he checked the messages on his cell phone. He sat next to her, playing with her hand while he continued texting on his phone. They were sitting in a secluded corner in her restaurant, AquaNox, waiting for their lunch to arrive. Her own cell beeped once, twice and then several times. Keya, Sheena and she had a common messaging group where they could all chat together and she was being bombarded by messages from the two of them demanding to know where she was and why she was evading their calls and texts. She hadn't spoken to them yet or to Janak for that matter about Sameer and her. She would have to and soon, glancing at the thirty odd text messages that had flashed on her screen in the last few minutes.

She saw Sameer frown and she squeezed his fingers. "You look worried. Is everything fine?"

Sameer kept his phone aside. "Oh yeah! It will be." He slid closer to her, lacing her hand with his. Before Raashi could question him further, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "Don't panic now, but..."

But before he could finish Raashi heard a sharp squeal.

"OH MY GOD!"

Raashi looked up to see Sameer's twin sisters standing in front of their table with stunned expressions on their faces.

"It's Raashi!" Shauna said surprised.

"Yes, it is. I am so happy it's you, Raashi," Rhea said joyously.

Both the girls swooped down and hugged her tight, planting kisses on her

cheeks. They looked delighted and Raashi wondered what in the world was going on. She tried to slide away from Sameer but he held her hand tight, shaking his head.

The girls quickly sat down. "It's been Raashi all along and you kept it from us?" Shauna asked with an accusatory frown.

"How could you? You know we love her," said Rhea making a face.

"Hi, girls. I am happy to see you too. You're interrupting a perfectly good date, by the way," Sameer told his sisters who gave him a sassy smile in return.

"Oh, just a little heads up. Mom's headed here as well," Shauna told him sweetly.

"Along with dad," Rhea said, taking pleasure in the announcement.

Raashi turned to look at Sameer who had a resigned expression on his face. He knew, she realized. He knew they would be here. God! His parents were coming and she had no clue what to expect or what he had told them about her. She was so annoyed with him for not preparing her for this moment. She glared at him. Sameer gave her a placating smile in return.

Shauna saw their exchange. "Oh! Don't worry, they will love you," she told Raashi.

"You see," Rhea said, "He's been keeping you a secret." She pointed at her brother. "So we decided to find out which woman has captured our brother's heart and here we are. Oh, look, here come mom and dad."

Raashi looked up to see Sameer's parents headed their way.

Rita Sehgal knew it was time to take matters in her own hand. Her son was spending lesser and lesser time at home and she wanted to know what was going on. Sameer looked love-struck and he hadn't been home several nights in a row. It was time to get to the bottom of it all.

She had tried asking Sameer several times but he had refused to tell her anything and Rishi was as tight lipped as ever. Luckily, her two girls were relentless when they wanted to find out something about their brothers. One call to Sameer's secretary in the morning and they knew where he was.

Rita was proud of all her kids. Sameer had always been her good son. He wasn't as wild as his younger brother and neither was he a rebel like his sisters. But he was stubborn, fiercely independent and very successful.

Sameer attracted attention wherever he went, particularly female attention and he knew it. This one girl it seemed had brought him to his knees. She could see it in his eyes.

She recognized Raashi as soon as they walked into the restaurant and saw Sameer sitting close to her. She had met her before at Sheena's wedding and then at Keya's and had also run into her at Janak's party. She knew Raashi was close to Sheena and Keya and that Janak doted on her.

Rita had learned through her sister-in-law, Mina Sehgal, Kabier's mom's experience that once these Sehgal men made up their mind regarding the woman they wanted, there would be no stopping them. Not that she would stand in the way of her son's happiness. She wanted the best for him and she just needed to see and judge for herself if this girl was the right one for her brilliant son.

They reached the table and she waited and watched as Sameer stood up with Raashi and introduced her to them.

Raashi had met Sameer's parents briefly in the past, during both her friends' weddings and at Janak's party. But it was nothing compared to meeting them now. She was nervous. But they were nice and friendly and treated her like she was their future daughter-in-law. It was strange because Sameer had never spoken of marriage to her.

So she smiled and spoke to them pleasantly and answered their questions as best as she could. His parents were equally surprised, fascinated and impressed that AquaNox was hers and that she owned a small but successful restaurant business. They were a lovely couple and although his father was a man of few words, he had a sharp intelligence in his eyes. His mother on the other hand was bubbly, vivacious and talkative. Raashi understood where the twins had inherited their gregarious nature. At the end of the hour she felt like she was on the hot seat. She breathed a sigh of relief as they all stood up to leave after their lunch.

Sameer held the exit door for his mom as their driver brought the car around. Just before she settled inside the car she kissed his cheek and whispered, "I like her. Don't you dare mess this up, okay?"

Sameer smiled at his mom and shut the door. His father glanced at him briefly from the other side of the car and gave him a thumbs-up sign before they drove away. He turned to walk back into the restaurant to see Raashi

waiting for him at the exit, staring daggers at him. His sisters were nowhere to be seen.

He walked towards her, and put his hands out in an appeasing gesture, “I just found out. I swear. I didn’t know they were coming. That text message earlier? It was Rishi. He found out my parents and sisters were headed our way and gave me a heads up. I tried to tell you, but the girls got to us before I could.”

“Sameer, I wasn’t prepared for your family to find out about us so soon.”

Standing close to her, he lifted her chin up, forcing her to look into his eyes. “Well, you had to meet them sometime. And since you’re going to marry me, I think it’s best to meet my family as well, isn’t it?”

Raashi gaped at him, her mouth open wide. Did he just announce to her that she would marry him? That was so typically arrogant of him. She stepped back, away from his hold. “I did not hear a proposal in that statement anywhere.”

“Will a ring change your mind?”

Sameer knew he had stunned her, again. He couldn’t live without her. He loved her so much. Of course, he wanted to marry her and soon.

He watched as she kept opening and closing her mouth, like she had absolutely run out of words. Finally, she recovered sufficiently to say, “You have a ring?”

“No,” he smiled sheepishly. “But, we can go get one right now. I honestly was thinking about getting you one. But then I wanted you to have the joy of choosing your own ring. So, what say? Will you marry me?”

Raashi stared at him for a few seconds.

“Oh my goodness!” Raashi rubbed her forehead. “This is the craziest marriage proposal ever.”

He stepped towards her and put his arms around her, pulling her to him. “You and I have been crazy from the start. Our relationship has been far from normal. So why not add a crazy proposal to the mix? That too right in front of your restaurant where I fell for you all over again!” Sameer gazed up at the board of AquaNox above them.

Raashi smiled. She couldn’t help it. She knew he was remembering the last time they were at AquaNox when she had unceremoniously dropped a

bowl of pasta on his lap. They had come a long way since then.

Sameer pressed her closer to him. "You haven't replied yet, sweetheart. Will you marry me?"

"I love you. And yes, the proposal is completely, utterly, unbelievably insane. But...it's perfect. Yes, I will marry you."

Sameer let out a shout of joy and lifted her off her feet and twirled her around. Raashi laughed, her heart thumping in joy.

"What is going on?" Sameer heard Rhea say.

He lowered Raashi down and still holding her, said, "She said yes."

His sisters looked at him strangely and then their eyes widened in understanding. They screamed in delight. They pulled Raashi out of his arms and hugged her. They jumped on him and hugged him too, talking excitedly and animatedly. And then they promptly forgot about him as they peppered Raashi with questions.

"Girls, I am just going to get my car," he told them with a loving smile on his lips. His sisters were oblivious to what he said, as they continued chatting with Raashi. But Raashi nodded at him, still smiling. He grinned at her back. How the hell did he get to be so lucky?

"How are things with you?" Raashi asked Rhea when Shauna went to get their car.

The younger girl smiled. "Everything is fine. I don't know what you said to both my brothers that day, but they apologized to me. They have been great ever since. Especially Sameer. He's been very understanding and he actually listens to me these days. And I know it's all because of you."

"Really, sweetie, I didn't do much,"

"I know it was you. I may not be ready to confide in my brothers, yet, but I am getting there. I will, soon."

Rhea hugged her. Raashi held the girl and then noticing Sameer driving towards them broke from her. Still clutching Rhea's arm, she stepped down from the pavement onto the road to wait for Sameer.

Raashi was so focused on what Rhea was saying that she didn't see the speeding bike coming her way. She heard Sameer's frantic yell a second before the bike almost slammed into her. She stepped back, just in time and tripped over the pavement, falling onto her back. The biker never slowed

down, he went careening into the traffic and disappeared around a corner. If she would have dithered even a second longer, he would have crashed right into her.

Rhea was crouched next to her, her face lined with worry. The next moment Sameer's face came into view.

"Raashi, oh, God! Are you okay?" Sameer asked her. Raashi couldn't reply. She was completely dazed and disoriented.

"Raashi, talk to me, sweetheart. Are you in pain?" Sameer asked her. When she still didn't reply, he became anxious. "Talk to me, baby." Raashi could hear the agony and fear in his voice. She swallowed as she tried to gather her bearings. Her back hurt due to the fall, but that was it.

"My back hurts," she whispered, swallowing again.

Sameer cursed long and hard. A crowd of onlookers had gathered and he could see several of Raashi's staff surround them. Rhea held out a bottle of water and Sameer grabbed it. He gently lifted Raashi's head and helped her take a few sips of the water.

"Sweetheart, do you think you can move?" Sameer asked her.

When she nodded, he gathered her in his arms and carried her to his car, which he had left running on the side of the road in his rush to get to her. Rhea followed him as he lay Raashi down on the back seat of the car.

"I am going to take her to the doctor and then drive her to her house. Go home with Shauna. I will talk to you later."

Chapter 25

A few hours later, Sameer stood at the door watching intently as Raashi slept soundly in her bed. She had slightly sprained her back because of the fall. But the doctor had assured him she would be fine in a few days. That moment when the bike had careered towards her at full speed had been the worst in his life. He couldn't even describe the feeling of utter helplessness that had washed over him as he sat in his car, so far away from her, unable to protect her. He had yelled at her to move. Luckily for him she had heard him and stepped back, or else she could have been seriously injured. He shuddered at that thought.

"She will be fine, Sameer," Kabier told him, squeezing his shoulder. "Come on, let her rest."

By the time he had brought her home, Keya and Kabier were already there at her house. His sisters had made the calls informing Rishi and Kabier of her accident. Keya had a spare key to Raashi's house and was waiting when he arrived, ready to help. She helped him settle Raashi on the bed. Raashi went to sleep as soon as her head touched the pillow. Rishi had reached soon after.

Sameer slowly shut the door and went outside to the hall to join the others. They were waiting to hear what exactly had happened.

"So, this guy just came at her at full speed?" Kabier asked.

"Yeah, he never stopped even after. Just zoomed past, least concerned that he had injured someone," Sameer replied angrily.

"So reckless and dangerous," Rishi said.

"At least she's fine," Keya said quietly.

The doorbell rang and Sheena entered with their grandfather. They both looked panicked and upset. Sameer calmed them down and narrated the entire incident to them.

"One minute we were so happy. I had just proposed to her. She was so delighted and then the next moment she was lying on the ground injured." Sameer shut his eyes recollecting the horrific moment.

When he opened his eyes, there was absolute silence around him.

"Why are you all staring at me?" Sameer asked.

Sheena was the first one to speak. “Did you just say you proposed to her?”

Sameer nodded. “Didn’t the twins tell you guys? They were there. They know I proposed and Raashi accepted. I thought they must have already told you all.”

“Guess the girls didn’t want to steal your moment.” Rishi stepped forward and hugged him. “I am so happy for you guys.”

“Me too,” Kabier said.

Sheena folded her arms across her chest. “Raashi agreed to marry you?”

Sameer nodded.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because, I love him Sheena,” Raashi said from the doorway. “And he loves me.”

She took a step inside the room and winced. Sameer was immediately by her side. He put an arm around her, supporting her. “You need to be in bed. You are still in pain,” Sameer told her.

Raashi looked up at him lovingly. “No, I want to be here telling all these people who care about us that we are in love and getting married. Besides, I am feeling better. The pain is also bearable.”

“This is so fantastic,” Keya hugged her. “I am so happy,” she said excitedly. Then she pointed to her growing baby bump. “Gosh, I am going to be huge very soon. You better get married quickly.”

Kabier put his hands on his wife’s shoulders. “You will look perfect whenever they get married. So don’t hurry them.”

Janak got up from the armchair where he had been listening to them all. He walked towards Raashi. “How are you, my dear?”

She smiled softly at him. “I am just great. A little bruised but, so, so happy.”

“Well, then I am happy if you’re happy. That’s all I want.” Janak told her with a soft peck on her cheek.

He turned to Sameer. “You sure took a long time doing the right thing.”

“Not without a little help from you,” Sameer told his grandfather.

Raashi saw the look the two men shared. The last few months flashed in her mind and realization dawned. “Is that why you gave me the land?”

“Well, what other way was there to get the two of you together again? You’re both so damn stubborn. You needed a little push in the right direction,” Janak told her with elation.

She leaned up and kissed his old, weathered cheek. “Thank you for everything, as always. You are my greatest strength and I thank God every day for you.”

Janak beamed at her words.

Raashi turned to Sheena who stood a distance away trying her best to avert her gaze. Raashi called out to her, “Sheena, come on! Will you stop being such a drama queen? Get yourself here and give me a hug. You know I can’t move.”

Sameer knew that Sheena had been steadfast in her support to Raashi throughout. She had fought with him for his heartless behavior towards Raashi and she continued to maintain a strained relation with him because of that. But, now it was time to put the past behind them.

“Will you forgive me now, Sheena?” Sameer asked her, as she stood in front of them.

Sheena nodded slowly. Sameer kissed her cheek giving her a hug.

“So guys, I won the bet,” Keya told Rishi and Kabier. “Which means, you owe me 20 K each,” Raashi heard Keya say.

“What bet?” Sameer asked.

Keya told them about the bet they had made the night of Sheena’s party.

Raashi looked at all of them, grimacing at their atrocious behavior. “I cannot believe you guys would stoop to such a low. Placing a bet on our relationship is such a horrid thing to do.”

“Oh, please! All of us were confident of the outcome. It was going to happen, we just didn’t know when,” Keya shrugged nonchalantly. “It’s you guys who took such a long time to realize that you were meant to be together.”

Chapter 26

The days were passing in a blur. Once Sameer had informed his parents that Raashi had agreed to marry him they couldn't wait to begin the wedding preparations. His parents had welcomed her to the family with joy. Since his sisters were in town and because Jiya had time before her college reopened, the wedding date was set in two weeks.

Jiya had been ecstatic about their impending wedding. She promised to return home soon. Raashi had also called Rithwik to tell him her news. He was delighted for her and claimed full responsibility for getting her and Sameer together.

Sameer's sisters Shauna and Rhea sat at a table in the T-café waiting for her. The two of them had blended seamlessly into her life. They were very excited about the wedding and met her frequently. They would take her shopping with them or they would just come hang around at the restaurant she was in on that particular day and just be around her. Today was one such day.

Raashi walked to their table and sat next to Shauna. "Are you girls ready to leave?"

The girls had insisted on a family outing tonight. So, all of Sameer's family, including his parents and Rishi were going for a movie tonight. This was much to Sameer's annoyance who constantly complained that his sisters took way too much of her time. But she could see the happiness in his eyes each time he saw her with his family. He was delighted that she had gelled so easily with them.

They quickly left and she sat in the back as Rhea drove her car towards the cinema hall. Raashi stared at her hand. Sameer had slipped the ring on her finger last night. Raashi was thrilled with it. One look at the lovely heart-shaped diamond surrounded by smaller stones and she had fallen in love with it.

She tuned back into the girls' conversation. They were engrossed in an animated talk about what they were going to wear during the wedding functions. She smiled to herself and looked out of the window of the car. They were near the cinema hall already.

“Oh, look, I can see Sameer and Rishi waiting outside,” Rhea announced. “Raashi, why don’t we drop you first and then Shauna and I can go and park. We will meet you all inside. Let me just make this U-turn first.”

Raashi shifted to move to the other side of the car and that’s when all hell broke loose.

Sameer checked his watch. The girls would be here any minute and so would his parents. He waited along with Rishi outside the cinema hall for everyone to arrive. He saw his sister’s white Audi on the other side of the road with the girls in it. The car drove past them and he watched as Rhea moved forward to take the U-turn ahead of her.

Sameer stood frozen in shock as a huge SUV came out of nowhere and rammed into his sister’s car. Rishi gave out a loud yell. Hearing his brother shout, Sameer propelled himself into action and started running towards the car. As he ran towards them, he saw that the back passenger door was completely damaged, right where he had seen Raashi sitting a moment ago.

His heart churning and fear thrumming through his veins, he raced towards the car and saw Raashi step out of the other passenger door. He breathed a sigh of relief. He looked for his sisters immediately and seeing them standing on the side unharmed, gave a short prayer of thanks as he reached the girls.

He rushed towards Raashi. She spotted him and ran into his arms. He saw Rishi reach the twins at the same time.

“Are you hurt?” Sameer asked. Raashi shook her head.

He touched her face. “Are you sure?” Raashi nodded again clearly.

He held her hand and walked to his sisters. They were in shock as well. Luckily, their seat belts had been strapped on and the car airbags had deployed at impact. They were safe although slightly bruised. Sameer calmed them down while Rishi called the cops.

It took an hour for the police to arrive, for the girls to give their statements and to lodge a police complaint. It seemed like the longest hour of his life. The SUV that had banged into them had disappeared without a trace. On hearing about the car accident, Sameer’s parents had insisted everyone come home straightaway.

Sameer sat quietly as he watched his parents fuss over the three girls. This

was the second time in a week that someone had tried to harm Raashi, he thought to himself. It was definitely no coincidence that the car had rammed right into the passenger door where Raashi had been sitting. It was sheer luck that she had moved to the other side of the car and wasn't injured. Had she stayed seated where she was earlier, she would have been badly hurt. He needed to be alone with her and hold her in his arms, just to convince himself she was fine. As soon as this dinner was over he was taking her to her home and not letting her out of his sight...forever.

The next morning Sameer sat in his office thinking. He had figured out who was behind the attacks on Raashi. In the long interminable night while Raashi had slept soundly next to him, Sameer had lain awake thinking, pondering over all the possibilities. And each time, his mind came up with the same answer.

Finally, in the morning he made the call. He got connected on the second ring.

"Natasha, I need to talk to you," Sameer immediately got to the point. This wasn't a social call.

"Sure, go ahead," she said.

"I am sure you have heard. I am getting married to Raashi."

"Yes, congratulations," Natasha said.

"Thank you. But that's not what I called for." Sameer stood up and started pacing around his office.

"Okay, I am listening."

"Raashi has been involved in two accidents last week. Both could have been fatal but by some stroke of luck they were not. Fortunately, she is fine. However, there is something I need to ask you and I hope you will be truthful."

"Me, why me? I don't understand, Sameer. Do you think, I am involved?"

Sameer heard Natasha's surprised tone and pressed forward. "Not you, no. But it could be your father."

"My Dad?" Natasha gasped. "Absolutely not. How could you make such an accusation?" she asked angrily.

"The last time I met him, he threatened me, although indirectly. And now

Raashi is being targeted. So forgive me if I don't believe that he has nothing to with these accidents."

He then proceeded to tell her about his conversation with her father. Natasha heard him out. "Sameer," she said quietly, "I understand your concern but I assure you that it's not my father."

Sameer took a deep breath. "Jiten Arya is known to be ruthless in getting what he wants and if he thinks he can harm the woman I love, then he is sorely mistaken. I will do anything to protect her. He will lose if he is waging a war against me," he said strongly.

Natasha stayed silent for a few seconds. "Let me talk to him, Sameer. Give me time till evening to revert to you on this."

"Fine. I will wait for your call, but remember, if he has anything to do with this, then it will not end well!" Sameer said and disconnected.

Chapter 27

Raashi hadn't heard from Sameer. No message, no call, nothing. And when she had called him, he had spoken briefly and distractedly. So, now here she was walking up to his office. She was not okay with this silence between them, especially after last night.

Raashi blushed recalling the passionate night they had shared. As soon as they had entered her house, he had kissed her wildly, fervently. He didn't even take time to undress her properly. He had made love to her hard and fast. It was as if he wanted to possess her thoroughly just to prove to himself that she was alive and well. He had held her in his arms for a long time afterwards and then later he had gently undressed her and made love to her again. This time slowly and leisurely.

But throughout the night he had hardly spoken a word. And for the first time, since they had gotten back together, he hadn't been there in the morning when she woke up. He had left her a message telling her that he would pick her up from work in the evening. But, she was finding it impossible to work with all this silence from him. So here she was, come to meet him instead and to figure out what was bothering him.

Sameer was working on his laptop when she opened the door to his office. He looked up as she entered and smiled at her.

Raashi went around his desk and planted a kiss on his cheek. Sameer pushed his chair back giving her space and she settled onto his lap putting her arms around him.

"Hey, baby. Is everything okay?" he asked her, worry lining his face.

"You tell me. You left without a word." She pouted at him.

"I had some things to take care of, sweetheart."

Raashi frowned as she looked into his face, "Is that all you are going to give me?"

Sameer didn't reply.

"Come on, Sameer. I know you're worried for me. Both the accidents cannot be a coincidence and I suspect you have figured out what's going on. So stop hiding things from me. Tell me, I want to know, please."

He let out a huge sigh and then told her everything. About Jiten Arya's threat, his possible involvement and his phone call to Natasha. Raashi listened to him, stunned.

"When did you figure this out?" she asked him when he had finished.

"Last night during dinner with my parents."

"No wonder you were so quiet during the dinner." She jabbed his chest with her finger. "Don't hide things from me ever again, you get that?"

She saw a guilty look flash on his face for a moment.

"Is that right?" he asked her, cocking his head to the side and smiling naughtily.

Raashi narrowed her eyes. "What else have you done?"

Sameer drew her closer and kissed the side of her neck, inhaling her soft scent. She always took his breath away and he couldn't live without her. Dressed in a loose white crop top over blue jeans, she looked gorgeous. His hands skimmed the skin at her waist and his lips trailed a path down her neck. Her breathing hitched for a moment and then Raashi said, "You cannot keep me distracted forever, you know."

Sameer laughed, his lips against her skin. His rich laughter vibrated around her filling her with happiness.

"I can try, at least," he said.

She lifted his head back and stared at him. "Tell me, now!"

"Promise you won't get upset?"

She raised her brows.

"I hired two bodyguards to watch over you," he said casually.

"What? Who? Where? I didn't see anyone."

"Good. That means they're doing the job I am paying them for," he remarked coolly.

Raashi punched his shoulder lightly in response. "I cannot believe you did that."

Sameer looked at her somberly. "This situation is not to be taken lightly and you would have never agreed to stay at home. So this is the only way I can breathe easy, knowing that you are safe."

“Ugh! This is so annoying. I hate it,” she complained.

Sameer lifted her chin and kissed her mouth. She closed the distance between them and gave into the kiss.

Sameer heard a throat being cleared. He lifted his head to see Kabier and Rishi staring at them, arms folded. Raashi saw them and jumped off his lap.

“Don’t you guys know how to knock?” Sameer asked, annoyed at their interruption.

“Well, we did. You were too busy to pay attention,” Rishi replied.

Before he could say anything more, his cell phone rang. Sameer stood up and took the call. It was Natasha. As he spoke to her, the muted conversation around him became silent when they all realized whom he was talking to. He had filled in Rishi and Kabier earlier in the day and that’s why they were here now.

He disconnected the call a few minutes later and turned to the three of them.

“Natasha says it wasn’t her father.”

“And we’re supposed to believe that?” Rishi asked.

“She says that her father swore on his deceased wife that he had nothing to do with Raashi’s accidents and she believes him.”

“What about Natasha herself?” Kabier asked carefully. Sameer knew that Kabier had gone through something similar with Keya before they got married and that’s why Kabier understood exactly how Sameer felt at this moment.

Sameer shook his head in the negative. “No. It’s not like her to do something like this.”

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned! Isn’t that the saying?” Rishi remarked.

“No,” Sameer shook his head. “I can’t see her doing something like this. She was never in love with me in the first place and that night of Sheena’s party she understood that. It’s not her for sure.”

“Which leaves us where exactly now?” Raashi asked.

Before Sameer could reply, the door burst open and Rhea strode in, her eyes brimming with tears.

Chapter 28

“Rhea,” Sameer said, rushing to his sister. “What has happened?”

Rhea wiped her tears and pressed a manila envelope in his hand.

“It was all about me. He was trying to hurt me and Raashi got caught in the middle. It’s all my fault.”

Sameer stared at her speechless and then glanced at Rishi and Kabier, who looked just as shocked as he did.

Raashi took Rhea’s hand and guided her to the sofa.

“Come on, honey. Explain to us. What exactly is going on?” Raashi asked her gently.

“I met Krish six months ago at a night club in London. A common friend introduced us and I liked him immediately. He was fun and knew how to party and I was completely taken in by him. He belonged to an affluent political family from Delhi. We started dating soon and it was so good. Then Kabier got married and I came to India and although I invited him, he couldn’t make it to the wedding. We were in touch throughout and he saw all my pictures on social media. They showed me dancing and posing with other friends and he started to get jealous. Every time I posted pictures he would call and fight with me and then make up soon after. I didn’t think too much of it then.”

She paused for a moment, and continued, “When I returned to London, he was not the same anymore. He behaved badly about everything. He became possessive. He would question me all the time... where I went, whom I spoke to and whom I met. We fought a lot. It was annoying after a while but I dealt with it because I thought...”

“Go on,” Sameer urged her.

“I thought I was in love with him and that I could make it work. When we weren’t fighting, everything was absolutely perfect. He was perfect. But with time he became more and more obsessive and I couldn’t deal with it any more. Shauna noticed him following us twice when we were returning home from college. He denied it when I confronted him. It came to a point where I couldn’t even go for a simple coffee with friends without him showing up there. I just couldn’t take it anymore. It was hard but Shauna encouraged me

to break up with him. I was heartbroken but I knew he was wrong for me. He kept messaging me and calling me to work it out with him. He promised he would change. And even though I wanted to believe him, I knew he was trouble. I didn't want him back in my life. It hurt a lot to break up with him and everything there reminded me of him. So, I left everything and came home."

A tear ran down her cheek, "I did what I thought was right...I didn't ... couldn't imagine that he would follow me here." She buried her face in her hands and wept inconsolably.

Sameer crouched down next to his sister and took hold of her hands. "I am so sorry, Rhea. I am sorry you had to go through this all alone. We should have been there for you. I am sorry you didn't have the confidence in us to confide. It's not your fault. I promise never to judge you in the future ever again. Please never go through something like this by yourself. We are all here for you. Every one of us."

She nodded giving him a teary smile.

Rishi started to say something, but choked, unable to speak. Sameer knew he was as devastated as him. They hadn't been there to help their sister when she had needed them the most. Rishi cleared his throat and said, "Why did you say he's trying to hurt you?"

"Take a look at the folder," Rhea said.

Sameer picked up the folder that had fallen from his hands and spilled its contents on the table.

He gasped out loud. They were all pictures of his sister. There were so many, some clearer than the others. Rhea in a restaurant; Rhea driving her car; talking on the cell; Rhea walking down a road; Rhea at a wedding. It went on and on. There were so many pictures. God! This guy had been stalking her for a long time. Sameer sifted through the pictures and found a note at the end – *'You can run, but you can't hide. I will always be there right behind you - K'*

"I received this envelope today," Rhea said, pointing at Sameer's hand. "That's when it dawned on me. The hotel incidents and Raashi's accidents, I was there every time. He's after me and Raashi just got caught in this miserable situation."

"I am calling Veejay right now," Kabier said and immediately dialed a

number on his phone.

Veejay Bellani was a close friend who worked with the crime branch. He had helped them in the past and Sameer was sure he would be able to help them again. He heard Kabier speak to him and understood that he was going to be here with them soon.

He turned back to Rhea. “What do the hotel incidents have to do with anything?”

Rhea started organizing the pictures in some sort of chronological order before speaking, “See this picture, this is the night of the car theft at the hotel.” The picture showed Rhea driving her car. “These are taken on the same night.” She pointed to few more of her, entering The Marquis Lobby, sitting in the café of The Marquis, talking to a friend.

“You told me that the car stolen from The Marquis was found a little distance away, unharmed?” Rhea queried.

Sameer nodded.

She continued, “Well, do you remember the make and model of the car that was stolen? I have a feeling it will match mine.”

Rishi immediately started scrolling through his emails, searching for the answer to her question. His eyes widened when he found the email he was looking for. “She’s right, Sameer,” he said. “The stolen car was a white Audi A4, same as hers.”

“I knew it. He tried to steal my car. But to my luck there was another white, Audi A4 that night at The Marquis and he stole that instead, thinking it was mine. Why do you think the car was found unharmed? Imagine, he was right there standing close by when I had handed my car tag to the valet and I didn’t see him.”

Sameer understood what his sister was getting at.

She pointed to other pictures, those of her wearing traditional Indian attire. “Look at these. This was the day someone gatecrashed that wedding I attended at the Sehgal Plaza. Looking at these, it’s obvious he was the one who was clicking pictures at the wedding. He was there for me.”

Sameer watched as she showed them some more pictures and explained where she was those days, including the days when she was with Raashi, the day he had proposed to Raashi and the day of the movie plan.

“That day outside AquaNox, Raashi and I were standing together on the pavement. She was waiting for you to bring your car around and I was waiting for Shauna to get the car. We were chatting. She saw your car and suddenly stepped down. But it could have been me. That guy on the bike was Krish, I am certain of it. And that car accident? Raashi was seated behind me. I was driving. He tried to crash his car into me, but he got the back door instead.”

Everyone was silent for a few minutes as they digested everything Rhea had told them. Sameer was furious. He could kill that guy with his bare hands.

“My God,” Raashi whispered finally.

“Show me a picture of this guy. I want to see who this loser is,” Sameer said angrily.

Rhea scrolled through her phone and handed it to him. Sameer took his time looking at the pictures and then handed the phone to Kabier and Rishi to take a look.

There was a knock on the door and Veejay Bellani walked in. The guys all shook hands with him. He turned to Sameer. “Congratulations. I heard about your news.” Veejay inclined his head towards Raashi and gave her a quick smile as well. “I am happy for you both. But first things first, where’s your sister?”

Raashi had met Veejay briefly when he had helped them rescue Keya from a kidnapping earlier that year. She saw him take in the photographs on the table and Rhea’s red-rimmed eyes. He sat down on the couch next to Rhea. “You must be Rhea. Can you fill me in on what’s happening?”

Raashi went up to Sameer and linked her hand in his, silently offering her support. She could see the pain and concern in his eyes. She listened to Rhea explain everything to Veejay who asked her several questions in return.

Finally, Veejay said, “OK, as I understand the situation, this ex-boyfriend of yours is obsessed with you and since you are not interested anymore, he has decided to hurt you. Looks like he wants your attention and is willing to go to any lengths to get it.”

“I don’t understand one thing,” Kabier said. “I assume you are not in any sort of contact with this guy, Krish, right?” Rhea nodded. Kabier continued. “So how did he know where you were every single time?”

Rhea shrugged. "I don't know."

"Let me try something," Veejay said. "Rhea, can you give me a rough date of when all these pictures were taken? Whatever you can remember is fine."

Rhea scrolled through her phone and started writing on a piece of paper. Sameer saw Rishi going through his emails. He gave Rhea the dates of the two hotel incidents. Rhea finished writing and handed the paper to Veejay.

"Well, I have it," Veejay said, comparing the paper to his phone. "See, I just logged in to my social media account and searched for Rhea Sehgal. When I open her page, I can see that she has done a check-in on her social media app, on those exact dates, at every single place mentioned in this paper and more. And I am not even connected with her on this app. See for yourself." He showed them his phone as he scrolled slowly through the page.

Kabier started reading loudly. "Rhea Sehgal checked into T-Café with Shauna Sehgal and Raashi Deewan; Rhea Sehgal checked into AquaNox with four others; Rhea Sehgal is at the Sehgal Plaza; Rhea Sehgal is at The Marquis with three others; Rhea Sehgal is attending a wedding...it goes on and on," he said, shaking his head irritably.

"Exactly," Veejay agreed. "These days it's so easy to track a person if they are putting it up on social media every time they are out. I am sorry to say this but you made it simple for this guy to stalk you. He has just been following your updates."

Sameer was taken aback. "God, Rhea! Your security settings are total crap. Anyone can see exactly where you have been or where you are, whenever you post an update. I have always hated this excessive fixation you girls have with your social media accounts. Honestly, I don't know what to say to you right now," Sameer said harshly.

Rhea gave him an apologetic look, finally understanding the harmful nature of her social media obsession.

"Unbelievable," Raashi said. "It's that simple these days, is it?" she asked Veejay.

"Oh! You should have a chat with the cyber-crime division. They deal with innumerable cases just because people have an unhealthy obsession with posting their lives online for anyone to see," Veejay replied. "Anyway, what's done is done. We need to find a way to catch this guy once and for all

and ensure that he doesn't harm you anymore. I have a plan," Veejay said, rubbing his hands together.

Chapter 29

“This is absolutely the worst plan ever,” Sameer grumbled. He was sitting on a corner table inside AquaNox, with Raashi, watching his sister on a date with Rithwik Bali.

Raashi squeezed his hand. “Come on. It’s a great plan. Veejay was right. If this Krish guy is obsessed with Rhea then he will come here tonight. We had to lure him in and the only way to do that was for her to update her social media page with a post that she was ‘On a date tonight’ with a check-in at AquaNox.”

Veejay’s plan had made complete sense to Sameer until they had to decide who would be Rhea’s date for the night. All three of them, Kabier, Rishi and he had volunteered but Veejay had shot them all down, saying they were family and most likely Rhea’s ex knew what they looked like. Rhea had suggested a few friends of hers but somehow enlisting the help of a twenty something year old didn’t sit well with any of them.

And then, Raashi had suggested Rithwik’s name. Sameer had vehemently protested but had been out voted by the rest. Kabier trusted Rithwik as he was also Keya’s close friend and for some reason Rishi also seemed to think that Rithwik would be a good choice. Sameer had to give in, although he was not too happy about it.

Hence, here they were enacting their plan at AquaNox waiting for Rhea’s ex-boyfriend to arrive, if he did indeed show up. Veejay had his team spread all around the restaurant. And he had insisted that it should be business as usual at the restaurant so that everything looked normal. The restaurant was filled with patrons all unaware that they were to play an inadvertent part of a trap to catch a stalker. Veejay himself was seated at a table close to the exit with one of his team. Kabier and Rishi were in Raashi’s office at the back, going through the live security camera with an expert from Veejay’s team. Sameer had wanted Raashi far away from the setup but it was her restaurant and she had argued that if there was danger then she wanted to be there with them and her staff. She had always led from the front and wasn’t going to stop now.

“Why did you have to ask Rithwik to help, though? Rithwik Bali as her date! Why did I let you convince me to agree to this?” Sameer complained as

he continued to watch his sister interact with Rithwik.

“Because, he can be trusted to keep this problem to himself and to think and act quickly if the situation demands.”

Sameer gave her a disgusted look and turned back to watch his sister. “Why is he holding her hand?” Sameer narrowed his eyes as Rithwik held his sister’s hand. “And look, he’s whispering in her ear now and she’s blushing. God! She looks like she’s in awe of him.”

Raashi patted his arm. “Will you relax? They’re just playing a part for anyone who may be watching them.”

When Sameer’s frown deepened, she turned his face towards her. “You have to stop with this unhealthy dislike you have for Rithwik.”

“I don’t dislike him, I hate him,” Sameer said grumpily.

Raashi laughed. “Really? All because he did exactly what I asked him to do? If you recall, I was the one who told him to kiss me. I couldn’t go through with it and he was tortured about it himself. He’s just a good friend. Why can’t you get it?”

“Okay. It will take me a while to forget that dreadful incident. But yes, I promise to get over it, in time,” Sameer replied sulkily.

Satisfied, Raashi switched the conversation to a different topic. An hour later and there was still no sign of the ex-boyfriend. Sameer saw Rhea whisper something to Rithwik and then she left the table and walked towards them. He turned to Veejay who shrugged his shoulders in surprise.

“What is she doing?” Sameer remarked. “This was not part of the plan.”

Rhea steered away from their table but looked at Raashi and tilted her head, blinking slightly in the direction of the rest rooms for Raashi to follow her.

“Let me go see what she wants,” Raashi said.

A few seconds later Raashi walked into the rest room.

“I don’t think he will show up. Let’s call this off,” Rhea said as soon as she entered.

Raashi looked at her watch. It was close to eleven in the night. “Hmm. Let’s just wait for a while longer and see if anything happens. Otherwise we will have to do this all over again.”

“I have been so nervous the whole evening. I have barely managed to get two words together and that’s so unfair to your friend. Rithwik is almost single handedly carrying the conversation ensuring that it looks like we’re enjoying our date. He’s great and I am thankful to him for stepping up to help me especially when he doesn’t even know me. But I am sure even he has his limits.”

Before Raashi could reply, the door opened again and a young man with a cap on his head walked in. Raashi turned to him and said, “Hey, this is the ladies rest room. You will find the men’s room at the other end of this corridor.”

She turned back to Rhea, expecting the boy to leave. The blood had drained out of the younger girl’s face. Raashi swiveled around quickly to look at the boy who had entered the restroom. He was pointing a gun at Rhea.

Oh, God! This was Krish. He was thickly built, but looked pale and had bags under his eyes. Where was Veejay and his team when they needed them and how did he get in here unnoticed?

“Hello, Rhea,” Raashi heard him say. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your future sister-in-law?”

Raashi gasped out in shock.

He turned to face Raashi, pointing the gun at her now. “Of course, I know you, Raashi Deewan. I know everything that is happening in my darling Rhea’s life.”

Raashi looked at Rhea who was white as a sheet and unable to speak. Her face was twisted in fear. One of them had to act quickly and get them out of this situation and looked like it would have to be her. Gathering her courage, Raashi said, “Why are you here, Krish?”

She had to keep him engaged until Sameer or Veejay or anyone else took notice that something was wrong.

Krish stared at Raashi with his eyebrows raised. “So, Rhea has been talking to you about me? Finally, it seems I have her attention. Apologies for the two accidents by the way. I hope you know that they were not meant to target you.”

He looked at Rhea, his gun still pointed at her. “You have been ignoring me, Rhea.” He took a step towards Rhea and paused. “Why, Rhea? You

know I love you. I cannot live without you and yet you left me. Here you are busy continuing your life as if I don't matter to you at all. And you're dating again?" He shook his head. "When I saw your post, I couldn't wait to see whom you had picked over me. And luckily for me I was close enough to come and wait for you here. I have been watching you since the minute you entered the restaurant. You seem to be enjoying yourself with him. Did you even consider how I would feel? How could you do this to me?"

So that explained why no one had noticed him before. They were all waiting for him to arrive, when the reality was that he had already been here all along.

When Rhea remained silent, he said, "Do I have to shoot your sister-in-law to get your attention, Rhea?" He turned his gun to Raashi. "I will do it, you know."

"S-S-sorry Krish," Rhea stuttered. "Just leave Raashi out of th...this."

"Oh! I will," Krish said. "It's you I want. Not her."

Raashi took a tentative step and raised her hands in a placating gesture. "Don't do this, Krish. Leave her alone and go. It's not too late. Go back to London and live your life."

"Enough. My life is nothing without Rhea. I am nothing without her. I don't have a fight with you Ms. Deewan but I am willing to do anything to get to Rhea."

He raised his gun. "Wait. Wait. Please don't shoot. I'll do whatever you say," Rhea pleaded.

Krish smiled in a cruel twisted way that made Raashi's gut churn. "Good girl. So this is what we are going to do. Ms. Deewan come here to me and then the three of us will leave this restaurant together, quietly and without making any noise. And remember no tricks." He raised his gun emphasizing his point.

Raashi walked up to him nervously. He immediately pulled her to him, and put an arm around her waist, his gun at her back, hidden from view. Raashi shook as the cold, hard, metal nudged into her back.

"Now, Rhea, you will lead us out of here. I have a car parked outside. Once you reach the car, you will quietly get inside and then I will let your sister-in-law go. One wrong move and I kill her. Is that understood, Rhea?"

Rhea nodded. "Come on. Let's go then," he said grinning cruelly. "Oh and make sure to tell your date that you are ditching him now."

They made their way out of the rest room into the main area of the restaurant. Sameer spotted them instantly. Their eyes met and Raashi saw a look of horror cross his face when he saw Krish escorting her with his arm around her. He almost took a step forward but Raashi gave a subtle shake of her head that had him freezing in place.

As Rhea walked slowly forward, she noticed Veejay on Rithwik's table. The two men stopped talking as they saw her. They looked behind her and understanding dawned in their eyes. Rhea nodded slowly at them confirming their unspoken query. Very casually, Veejay stood up, shook hands with Rithwik and left the restaurant ahead of her. Raashi was petrified. One false move and there would be a blood bath in her restaurant.

She watched as Rhea slowly walked up to her table to Rithwik. Krish deliberately waited with Raashi within hearing distance as Rhea told Rithwik that she had to leave. Raashi heard Rithwik deliberately spend a few minutes questioning Rhea as to why she was leaving early before letting her go. Raashi hoped the delay would be enough for Rithwik and his team to act. They needed their help and quickly.

"It's the black SUV in the back," Raashi heard Krish tell Rhea after they walked further into the parking lot. There was no one there. It was deserted. Probably on account of Veejay who must have ensured that the parking lot was cleared of people the moment he had walked outside after seeing Krish with Rhea and her.

Where was Veejay? Raashi thought. He must have prepared his team by now. But there was nothing he could do, not with a gun pointing at her back. She wasn't even sure Veejay had seen the gun.

Raashi stopped walking when she heard Sameer's voice from behind.

They all turned as Sameer casually sauntered up to them.

"Where are you girls going?" he asked them coolly and then he looked at Raashi, "Who is your friend, Raashi?"

He was an idiot. Raashi thought to herself. The biggest sort of fool to ever walk the face of this earth. Wasn't it enough for him that two of them were already in danger that he had to insert himself into the situation as well? Raashi's fear for herself had evaporated and multiplied a hundred fold the

moment she heard Sameer call out to them. She would kill him, slowly and painfully just for putting his own life in danger. That is if they managed to come out of this situation alive first. And where was Veejay when they needed him?

Rishi raced out with Kabier. They had seen the entire scene unfold on the security camera. They reached Rithwik who was standing hidden behind a few cars. Rishi watched in mounting dread as Krish shoved the girls further into the car park. He turned to look for Veejay and found him silently moving ahead with his team, their guns drawn and ready. He looked for Sameer but before he could ask Rithwik about him, he saw his brother reach Raashi and Rhea.

“What the hell is Sameer doing? Has he gone mad?” Rishi asked angrily.

“I don’t know what he is thinking. Why couldn’t he wait for Veejay?” Rithwik queried in dread.

“The woman he loves has a gun to her back. Do you think he’s going to wait and watch?” Kabier stated. The two of them gave him a blank stare. “Seriously, you guys? You don’t get it do you?” When they still looked blank, he said, “Forget it. I am not even going to try and explain to you what he must be going through right now.” Kabier shook his head and turned back to look at Sameer talking to Rhea’s ex.

Krish stepped forward, his gun pointing at Sameer in the empty parking lot. “So, you’re the elder brother is it?”

Raashi took a step to the side and another as quietly and unobtrusively as she could.

“And you’re the one messing with my sister,” Sameer said stepping carefully in front of Raashi, blocking her with his body. “Is that gun even really loaded?” he asked. “And do you know how to use it?”

Raashi mumbled something from behind him that sounded a lot like ‘Have you gone mad?’

But, honestly, what choice was there? He had died a thousand deaths the moment he had seen the gun pointed at Raashi’s back. He was horrified when Krish forced the two girls to walk out of the restaurant. Whatever Veejay planned to do was another matter. There was no way Sameer would let this neurotic, psychotic person harm his girls.

Raashi peered from behind him and saw the surprise on Krish's face. His hand faltered.

That was all the encouragement Sameer needed. As soon as the gun wavered, he pounced on Krish and grabbed his gun holding hand, high in the air, tackling him.

"Raashi, Rhea, run NOW!" Sameer yelled.

Krish screamed, "NO!"

Without a word, Rhea ran back towards the restaurant. Raashi took a step back but refused to leave. She saw Sameer punch Krish with his left hand while his right still held Krish's hand in a death grip. A gunshot sounded, echoing loudly around them. Raashi screamed and shut her eyes. She fell to the ground in fear.

Strong arms encircled her and held her close. She took a deep breath and inhaled his woody, musky scent and opened her eyes. Sameer! He was kneeling next to her. She ran her eyes over him, searching his body for a sign of blood but was relieved to see none. Her hands roved his face, his chest and arms, and breathed out deeply, convinced now that he was fine.

"Hey, baby, I am okay. It's all over," Sameer told her.

Raashi saw Veejay and his team surround Krish. He was gripping his left shoulder in agony and blood was seeping through the wound.

Raashi turned back to Sameer and punched him on his shoulder, hard.

He winced. "What was that for?"

"How dare you put yourself in danger?" Raashi yelled at him. "Who asked you to be superman and come fight with the bad guy? Couldn't you let Veejay do his job?"

"And how do you think I felt knowing you were in danger?" Sameer asked her angrily. "Should I have just folded my arms and watched while that psycho held a gun to your back? No! That wasn't happening. And why didn't you leave when I asked you to? Do you ever listen?"

"You're mad. You know that. What if something had happened to you?" Raashi said as a tear slid down her face and then she broke down completely. The horrifying events of the last half-hour came crashing down on her and she burst into tears.

"Oh! Sweetheart. Don't cry. It's all over now. I am safe, we all are,"

Sameer said.

He gathered her in his arms and kissed the tears off her face. Raashi melted into him, her arms wrapping tightly around his neck. She brought her lips to his and kissed him greedily. She wanted to wipe away the memory of the agonizing moments they had just been through. Sameer kissed her back, thankful that she was safe.

“I love you so much,” she said between kisses and tears.

“And I love you, forever and always.” Sameer said.

Epilogue

“Dance with me,” whispered a lilting voice from behind him. A delicate hand touched his arm and turned him around.

Sameer smiled at his wife. Life had come full circle for him. Once again, a romantic song played in the background and once more his hotel lawns were decorated and lit up magnificently for a wedding reception, his wedding reception. He looked into her beautiful sparkling eyes and led her to the dance floor. He gathered her in his arms as they started to slowly sway to the music.

Once again, he was dressed in a three-piece suit and she was wearing a beautiful gown, this time in gold. He let his eyes rove over her, taking in the low neck, cap sleeves, corset style gown that flowed to her feet.

“Like what you see, Mr. Sehgal?” Raashi asked him teasingly.

“Wrong. I love what I see. You look stunning tonight.”

“And you’re not doing too bad yourself,” Raashi said. It felt like they were back in time.

Sameer chuckled, remembering her saying the very same thing that fateful night.

Raashi sighed and moved closer to him, her husband. She couldn’t believe they were married. The ceremonies had taken place earlier in the day. After the whirlwind few days they had had, she finally felt at peace.

She looked around the crowd, thankful to be surrounded by the people who mattered to her. Her sister, Jiya, sat with Shauna and Rhea, the girls, no doubt hatching up some new plan of mischief. The three of them got along like a house on fire and she dreaded the trouble the three of them could get into together. She let her eyes linger on Rhea for a second more. Rhea looked fine but Raashi could see the shadows haunting her eyes. She had become quieter now and it would take time for her to heal, but she would get there.

Veejay had assured Rhea that Krish would never trouble her again. After speaking to Krish’s parents about the entire situation they had begged them not to file charges against him. They had accepted that their son needed help and were ready to send him to a medical facility to heal. After a lot of discussion and Rhea’s permission, that is exactly what they had done.

A few days back, Rhea had informed them that she was finally ready to return to London and resume her education. It was time to let go and begin anew. Raashi was pleased with Rhea's decision.

Raashi smiled as she saw Keya and Kabier dancing slowly next to them, lost in each other's arms. The baby was going to arrive soon and she was so happy for the two of them. She turned her head to see Sheena and Rajiv sitting at a table with Sameer's parents.

Rishi was talking to Veejay and both raised their glasses in a silent toast to her as they saw her watching them.

Janak, she noticed, was talking to an older looking man. Raashi thought he looked familiar but was unable to recollect who he was. Rithwik, her dear friend was at the bar getting a drink for himself.

She laid her head on Sameer's shoulder, feeling content. She had always wished for a deep abiding love and she was blessed to have found it with him. To think that at one time she had never imagined herself being in this situation and now here she was finding her own forever.

"What are you thinking?" Sameer asked her.

Raashi sighed and tightened her arms around him. "I am thinking of the last time we danced like this. You charmed me so thoroughly that night. I think I was already half in love with you. But then you left and never called."

"Yeah and I think I needed that distance from you to actually find my own heart. And when I saw you again, I understood. You had my heart right from the beginning. It just took me too long...way too long to figure it out."

"We have come a long way indeed," Raashi said softly.

Sameer gathered her closer into his arms leaving no space between them. "Undeniably. All I want right now is to be alone with you."

Sameer lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them.

"You think anyone would mind, if we...crept away?" Raashi asked him, her eyes sparking with mischief.

"Only one way to find out," Sameer said. He took her hand in his. "Come on. Let's go start our forever, now," And he led her to the exit.

Janak Sehgal watched as his grandson pulled Raashi towards the exit of their hotel lawns. History had repeated itself and settled very well for these

two. He was delighted with this outcome. He couldn't have chosen a better man for his angel, Raashi, than his own grandson, Sameer. They were perfect for each other in every way and more. He smiled.

"Looks like you got your wish after all," said a voice at his side.

Janak Sehgal turned to see Varun Bali standing next to him, sipping his drink.

Janak nodded at him. "Thank you for putting Raashi's name on the top of your son's list of brides. It was brilliant and I owe you. Sameer couldn't hurry up to claim her after he found out Rithwik was pursuing her."

Varun Bali smiled. "I am happy it turned out well for Sameer. My son on the other hand has decided to drink himself to oblivion."

He raised his glass pointing it at Rithwik who stood at the bar downing one drink after the other.

"Are you sure forcing him to marry is the right thing for him?" Janak asked carefully.

"That boy parties late almost every single night and is at work at sharp ten the next morning. And then he works the whole day and late into the night at times and then the cycle continues endlessly. The only two women who even remotely mattered to him are both married to your grandsons. He needs to settle down before he burns himself up," Varun Bali said watching his son. "And if the only way I can get him to do that is to threaten him with losing the work that he loves, then I am willing to take the risk. Besides, so many arranged marriages have worked in the past. I can't see why his would not."

Varun Bali watched as Janak's other grandson Rishi joined Rithwik at the bar. A few minutes later the two of them left the party together in very high spirits. For sure, they would be painting the town red that night. He shook his head and sighed deeply. Someday his son would understand that everything he did was for him. Till then, well tomorrow, was yet another day.



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