

WE A Journey

A ROMANTIC COMEDY

Shubham Pant



BlueRoseONE.com
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Shubham Pant 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRose ONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7825-840-4

Cover design: Shubham Pant
Typesetting: Simran

First Edition: April 2026

Contents

Chapter 1: Kabir, The Laidback Dreamer	2
Chapter 2: The Collision	20
Chapter 3: Strings Attached	32
Chapter 4: Destined Detours	36
Chapter 5: Lights, Laughter, and Hidden Shadows	40
Chapter 6: A Day in the Lanes of Mumbai	48
Chapter 7: The Almost Confession awaited.....	57
Chapter 8: Love in a Foreign Language.....	65
Chapter 9: Lost and Found.....	72
Chapter 10: When Cities Speak	79
Chapter 11: Cracks in the Glass	88
Chapter 12: Miles Apart.....	94
Chapter 13: Back to Where It Hurts	100
Chapter 14: The Sangeet Storm.....	106
Chapter 15: Simmering Sparks	113
Chapter 16: The Return.....	120
Chapter 17: Ghosts That Don't Stay Buried.....	127
Chapter 18: The Dance Floor Duel.....	134
Chapter 19: The Morning After	141
Chapter 20: Rollercoaster.....	148
Chapter 21	154
Chapter 22: Scene Map (The Public Confrontation).....	161
Chapter 23: The Resolution.....	167
Chapter 24: Shaadi Wala Engagement.....	173

Chapter 25: Shaadi, Shaadi, Shaadi!..... 180

Chapter 26: Baby, Baba, and Bollywood Parenting..... 186

Chapter 27: Final Chapter – The Fracture Beneath
Forever..... 192



Chapter 1

Kabir, The Laidback Dreamer

Kabir Mehra believed in two things firmly:

1. Life was too short to take seriously.
2. Breakfast after noon tasted better than breakfast before it.

On most mornings, this philosophy was visible in his room. A battlefield of crumpled T-shirts, unwashed coffee mugs, and a laptop that had been open on Netflix since the night before. The curtains were drawn tight, blocking out the harsh Mumbai sun, and somewhere amidst the chaos, Kabir lay sprawled across his bed, one arm dangling off the side, snoring softly.

“Kabirrrrr!” His mother’s voice cut through the flat like a siren. “Do you plan to sleep through your entire life, beta? It’s already 10 o’clock!”

Kabir stirred, groaned, and pulled the blanket over his head. 10 o’clock. Still too early.

Within seconds, his bedroom door flew open. Mrs. Mehra, petite but armed with the authority of a school principal, marched in. “You have an interview today, remember?” she snapped, hands on her hips.

Kabir peeked out from under the blanket. His hair looked like it had been electrocuted, eyes half-closed. “Interview? Ma, I

already told you—I'm not cut out for a nine-to-five. Creative souls like me need freedom."

"Creative soul?" Mrs. Mehra raised an eyebrow. "Last week you wanted to be a travel blogger. Before that, you said photography was your passion. And don't forget the time you announced you'd start a startup about... chai-flavored ice cream!"

Kabir sat up, grinning sheepishly. "People would've loved chai ice cream. It was ahead of its time."

Before his mother could argue, his father's deep voice boomed from the living room. "Useless fellow! At your age, I was already managing the family business."

Kabir rolled his eyes. Mr. Mehra loved two things: business and reminding Kabir that he was a disappointment at it.

"Relax, Dad!" Kabir shouted back. "I'm just... figuring things out."

"By sleeping?" his father retorted.

Mrs. Mehra sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. She had been through this routine so often, it had practically become their family's background music. "At least shower and look presentable. What if you actually get the job this time?"

Kabir muttered under his breath, "Big if."

Half an hour later, Kabir emerged from his room wearing jeans, a T-shirt with Not Today, Monday printed across it, and his most charming smile. His hair was still messy, but styled just enough to look deliberate.

His younger sister, Anika, was sitting at the dining table scrolling on her phone. Without looking up, she said, “Bhai, no company is going to hire someone who dresses like a failed stand-up comedian.”

“Failed? Excuse me!” Kabir said, striking a mock-dramatic pose. “I am an undiscovered talent. One day the world will recognize my brilliance.”

“Yeah,” Anika deadpanned, “probably the same day unicorns start delivering pizza.”

Their banter filled the apartment with laughter—except for Mr. Mehra, who sat reading the newspaper with a disapproving frown, and Mrs. Mehra, who was too busy shoving parathas onto Kabir’s plate to care.

Two hours later, Kabir found himself standing outside the glass doors of Orbit Technologies, the kind of corporate office that made him feel itchy just by looking at it. Everyone inside looked sharp, rushed, and entirely too serious.

He adjusted his T-shirt, wondering if the blazer he had borrowed from his cousin was enough to “corporatize” him. It didn’t quite fit—the sleeves were too long—but Kabir decided confidence was better than tailoring.

Inside, the receptionist gave him a once-over and raised an eyebrow. Kabir flashed his signature grin. “Hi. I’m here for the interview. Kabir Mehra. Candidate... extra-ordinary.”

She blinked, unimpressed. “Have a seat. They’ll call you.”

Kabir plopped into a leather chair, trying not to yawn. Around him, other candidates sat stiff, holding files and resumes, murmuring technical jargon. One guy was even revising notes.

Kabir leaned over and whispered, “Bro, relax. This isn’t the Olympics.”

The man stared at him like he was insane.

When Kabir’s turn came, he swaggered into the interview room. Three panelists stared at him from across a shiny wooden table.

“So, Kabir,” one of them began, “tell us about yourself.”

Kabir leaned back casually. “Well, where do I start? I’m fun, energetic, and I can make even the most boring Excel sheet look entertaining.”

The panelists exchanged confused glances.

“Your previous work experience?” another asked.

Kabir scratched his chin. “Work experience is such a limiting term, don’t you think? I’ve had life experience. I ran a travel blog—short-lived, yes, but viral among my six loyal followers. I tried photography, where my dog was my muse. And of course, I almost launched a startup about chai ice cream. Market wasn’t ready, but the vision was pure.”

Silence.

“Do you know Java?”

“Of course,” Kabir said brightly. “I had a latte just this morning.”

The interviewers groaned. One of them scribbled something on his sheet—probably never call again.

“Okay,” the sternest panelist said. “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

Kabir thought for a second. “Alive. Hopefully rich. Maybe on a beach in Bali, writing a book about how interviews kill creativity.”

One of the interviewers choked on his water.

Needless to say, Kabir didn’t get the job.

By evening, Kabir’s friends had dragged him to their usual hangout—a roadside chai tapri near Juhu. His gang included Arjun, the practical one;

Rohan, the romantic fool; and Imran, the self-proclaimed philosopher.

“So, how did the interview go?” Arjun asked, sipping his cutting chai.

Kabir sighed dramatically. “Another corporate massacre. I dazzled them with my charm, but apparently, they wanted... skills.”

“Skills?” Rohan smirked. “Like not mistaking Java for coffee?”

“Details, bro. Details,” Kabir waved him off.

Imran leaned back. “See, the system is broken. Companies want robots, not visionaries. Kabir, you are a visionary.”

Arjun rolled his eyes. “Visionary or not, he still has to pay rent. Unless his vision includes convincing the landlord to accept selfies as currency.”

The group burst into laughter, and even Kabir had to grin. Around his friends, rejection felt like less of a failure and more like another funny story.

That evening, Kabir flopped on the sofa, dramatically clutching his chest. “Another rejection! Another broken dream! Life is so cruel to misunderstood geniuses like me.”

His mother shook her head, while Anika burst out laughing. “Bhai, at this rate, you’ll have more rejection letters than Tinder matches.”

Kabir glared. “I’ll have you know, I’m very popular on Tinder.”

“Yeah, with bots,” she shot back.

Even his father could not help chuckling, though he quickly masked it with a cough.

Despite the humour, Kabir felt a tiny sting inside. He’d laugh, he’d joke, but somewhere deep

down, he knew his family’s frustration wasn’t entirely wrong. He hadn’t figured out his path. Not yet.

While Kabir was stumbling his way through interviews, Naina Sharma was conquering boardrooms.

At twenty-six, she was already one of the most promising associates in a top consulting firm. Her colleagues called her “the spreadsheet queen.” Her manager trusted her more than people twice her age. And her parents beamed with pride whenever they introduced her to relatives.

Naina’s mornings were the opposite of Kabir’s. By 6 a.m., she was out for a jog. By 7, she had read the news, checked emails, and make a to-do list for the day. Her room was spotless—books neatly stacked, clothes folded with military precision, and not a speck of dust in sight.

Her parents often joked that she was born with a planner in her hand. Even as a child, she organized her toys by colour and size.

But discipline came at a cost. Naina rarely laughed the way Kabir did. She rarely indulged in impulsive adventures. And though she had friends, she kept people at arm's length—her career came first, always.

Her mother sometimes worried aloud. “Beta, you’re doing so well, but don’t you think about... marriage?”

Naina smiled politely. “One thing at a time, Ma. Career first. Marriage will happen when it has to.”

Inside, she felt a faint pang. It wasn’t that she didn’t want love. She just didn’t trust it.

She had seen enough of friends’ heartbreaks, and had once tasted a tiny dose herself, when a boy in college had dismissed her dreams as “too ambitious.” That wound had taught her a lesson—focus on yourself, don’t wait for anyone.

On that very day, Kabir was sprawled on his balcony, strumming his guitar aimlessly, while Naina was sitting at her desk, preparing a presentation for a client in London.

They didn’t know it yet, but their paths were inching closer. Mumbai was about to play cupid, in the most chaotic way possible.

Because destiny had a wicked sense of humor.

And Kabir Mehra, the laidback dreamer, was fated to collide with Naina Sharma, the disciplined achiever—setting the stage

for a story full of laughter, heartbreak, and a love so surprising that even they wouldn't see it coming.

Later that night, Kabir lay on his bed scrolling aimlessly through his phone. His rejection tally had reached impressive levels, and he needed a distraction. His thumb paused on an old photo—him with his college gang at a fest, his arm around a girl who was laughing at something he had said.

Her name was Ritika Malhotra. His first “serious” affair.

Kabir smiled at the memory. Ritika was everything he thought he wanted back then: stylish, witty, and perpetually surrounded by admirers. And Kabir, in true Kabir fashion, decided the best way to win her heart was through grand gestures.

Like the time he had hired the college band to serenade her with a cheesy Bollywood number in the middle of the campus canteen.

“Ritikaaaaaa, tujhme rab dikhta hai...” the singer belted out while Kabir stood in the background holding a bouquet of roses.

The entire canteen burst into hoots and whistles. Ritika's expression, however, was somewhere between amusement and horror. She had leaned forward and whispered, “Kabir, you're sweet. But please don't ever do this again.”

Kabir groaned, burying his face in a pillow at the memory. “Hopeless romantic, my foot,” he muttered. But then he laughed too—because even though he had embarrassed himself, at least people remembered him.

And he did learn something that day: his heart was always louder than his head.

Naina's life had taken a different route. She never had the time or patience for grand crush dramas. In college, her focus was on acing exams, leading committees, and winning scholarships. But that didn't mean she lacked stories.

There was, for example, the infamous Group Project Incident.

It was the final semester, and she was assigned to a group with three boys who thought projects did themselves. For weeks, they slacked off, playing cricket and showing up late to meetings. Naina finally snapped.

"Fine," she told them one evening. "I'll do the project. But when we present it, I'll introduce you all as supporting cast."

The boys had laughed—until presentation day arrived. Naina stood in front of the professor, delivering a flawless analysis, graphs perfectly aligned. When it was time to introduce the team, she smiled sweetly.

"This was a group effort. I handled the research, the presentation, the writing. Rahul helped by... showing up once. Aman provided moral support. And Rakesh... well, he contributed snacks."

The class erupted in laughter. The professor, trying not to grin, gave her top marks. The boys never messed with her again.

From then on, Naina earned a reputation: disciplined, razor-sharp, and not afraid to call out nonsense.

While Kabir remembered love as a series of comic disasters, Naina remembered her youth as a balancing act between seriousness and sly wit.

Kabir's takeaway? Life's too short not to laugh at yourself.

Naina's takeaway? Hard work always wins—and if you can slip in a joke, even better.

Both believed they were doing fine on their own. Neither knew their philosophies were about to clash in the most chaotic, hilarious way possible.

The night wound down in Mumbai. Kabir strummed his guitar under the stars, crooning a half-made-up tune about heartbreak that was more comedy than tragedy. Across town,

Naina double-checked her planner, making notes for a meeting with an overseas client.

Two people. Same city.

Different worlds.

And yet, destiny had already started plotting.

Somewhere, unseen, invisible strings were pulling Kabir and Naina toward each other. Toward late-night banter, silly fights, stolen glances, and a love story that would be equal parts laughter and chaos.

But for now, the dreamer and the disciplinarian remained strangers—each unaware that their next chapter was about to begin.

The Mehra household wasn't quiet even on Sundays. Between Mr. Mehra's booming voice, Mrs. Mehra's endless nagging,

and Anika's sarcastic one-liners, Kabir often joked their apartment could be rented out as a live sitcom set.

The building watchman, who had known Kabir since childhood, once quipped: "Aapke ghar ki awaaz toh doosre floor tak aati hai." (Your home's noise reaches even the second floor).

This morning was no different. As Kabir's father ranted about wasted potential, the neighbor's parrot squawked in the background, as if echoing every "Useless!" hurled at him. Kabir leaned back, sipping his chai dramatically, and declared, "See, even nature agrees with you, Dad."

The parrot squawked again, sending Anika into fits of laughter. Mrs. Mehra, torn between amusement and frustration, muttered, "Bas, bas... dono baap-beta mil ke mujhe pagal karenge ek din."

Unlike most candidates, Kabir didn't prepare with resumes or technical notes. His prep included standing in front of the mirror, practicing different smiles.

"Too much teeth? No, too desperate. Smoldering? Nah, looks like constipation. Confident charm... ah, there it is."

When Anika walked in mid-rehearsal, she nearly dropped her phone laughing. "Bhai, you're going for an interview, not Bigg Boss auditions."

Kabir winked at her reflection. "Why not both? Imagine if HR hires me just for this face. Boom. Company morale: doubled."

By the time Kabir reached Orbit, he was already late. He had underestimated Mumbai traffic, gotten into a mild argument with an auto driver about the meter, and stopped to buy a

vada pav on the way. He walked in, wiping chutney from his hand with a tissue.

The receptionist's unimpressed stare could have frozen water. Kabir, ever the optimist, leaned on the counter and said, "Tough morning? You know, you'd look prettier if you smiled."

The glare she gave him could have melted his blazer.

Inside the interview room, his antics escalated:

"Do you know Excel?" they asked.

Kabir nodded confidently. "Of course. My mom uses it to track groceries, and I helped her once. I can make rows, columns, even color them. Picasso of Excel, that's me."

"What about deadlines?"

"I believe deadlines are... flexible. Like yoga. If you stretch them enough, they'll fit."

The panel groaned.

At one point, Kabir even tried to lighten the mood by telling a joke: "Why don't scientists trust atoms? Because they make up everything. Just like me in this interview!"

The silence afterward was deafening.

By the end, one of the interviewers massaged his temples. "Thank you, Mr. Mehra. We'll... get back to you."

Kabir left the room grinning. "Nailed it," he told himself.

At the chai tapri that evening, Kabir exaggerated the story.

“They were in awe of me, boys. Pure awe. The HR lady even started writing—probably my offer letter.”

Arjun raised an eyebrow. “Offer letter or restraining order?”

Rohan choked on his chai. “Bro, did you actually say deadlines are like yoga?”

“Creative metaphor!” Kabir defended. “Companies need innovation. Who else gives them that?”

Imran, nodding sagely, added, “Society fears innovators. Kabir, you are ahead of your time.”

“Exactly!” Kabir pointed dramatically. “One day, I’ll be remembered as a misunderstood genius.”

The chaiwala, who had been eavesdropping, snorted. “Misunderstood toh hai, beta. Genius ka mujhe doubt hai.”

The gang burst into laughter, and Kabir threw his hands up in mock offense.

Later, at home, Kabir replayed more memories of Ritika. He recalled how, after the serenade disaster, he had once tried writing her poetry.

“Your eyes are like Wi-Fi, connecting me to happiness. Your smile is like 4G, faster than everyone else’s...”

Anika found the old notebook once and still teased him with, “O Ritika, meri data plan.”

Though he cringed, Kabir also knew—deep down—that being a fool for love was better than never trying at all.

Across the city, Naina Sharma was wrapping up a twelve-hour workday. She thrived in high-pressure environments. Deadlines weren't yoga to her—they were sacred.

Her colleagues admired her, but some whispered that she was “too serious.” They hadn't seen the sharp humor under her composed exterior.

Like during the infamous College Debate Contest. Her opponent had tried to fluster her by saying, “Ladies shouldn't get too stressed about politics. Leave it to us men.”

Naina had smiled sweetly and replied, “If men are handling it so well, why is half the country stressed already?”

The audience had erupted in laughter, and the boy had turned beet red.

Even now, she remembered that moment fondly—not because she embarrassed him, but because she had realized something important: she could be witty without compromising her focus.

That night, Naina's parents fussed over her. Her mother, always softer, asked, “Beta, do you ever relax?”

“Relaxing wastes time, Ma. I'll relax after the next big promotion,” Naina said, half-joking.

Her father chuckled. “When you were six, you organized all your toys alphabetically. I knew then—this one's headed straight to CEO chair.”

“Papa!” she protested, but her smile betrayed her pride.

Still, when her mother cautiously mentioned marriage, Naina felt a twist inside. She wasn't against love. She just... didn't know if anyone could keep up with her.

And so, that day ended with Kabir strumming his guitar, inventing songs about heartbreak that sounded more like parodies, while Naina sat at her desk, highlighting documents with color-coded markers.

He was chaos wrapped in charm.

She was order wrapped in discipline.

Two entirely different rhythms of life.

But Mumbai, with its crowded trains, noisy streets, and unpredictable magic, had a way of throwing opposites together.

Neither Kabir nor Naina knew it yet—but their paths were already shifting closer, like parallel lines that destiny had secretly decided to bend.

The city wound down in its own strange rhythm that night. Autos honked less, streetlights flickered more, and the faint smell of rain clung to the air as if Mumbai itself was pausing for a breath.

Kabir leaned out of his balcony, strumming half-tuned chords, convinced the world owed him a standing ovation for his off-key singing. Across town, Naina tapped her pen against a notebook, sketching out her next five-year plan with the same precision Kabir avoided like the plague.

Two souls, unknowingly circling the same orbit.

For now, their stories ran parallel—his messy laughter, her neat lines of ambition. But the city had its own script. A crowded station, a misplaced file, or even a vada pav stall could be enough to collide their worlds.

Because in Mumbai, love doesn't always knock politely. Sometimes, it barges in with a filmy drumroll. And that drumroll was about to begin.

“Neither Kabir nor Naina knew it yet—but their paths were already shifting closer, like parallel lines that destiny had secretly decided to bend.”

That evening, Kabir sat slouched at the family dining table, poking at the aloo parathas like they were plotting against him. His father rustled the newspaper with a sigh that carried generations of disappointment, while his mother moved around the table with the quiet determination of a general in battle.

“Beta, at least eat properly. Maybe then you'll start thinking properly,” she said, sliding the pickle jar towards him.

Kabir groaned. “Maa, I think plenty. I think about... the future of food delivery apps, for instance. And why I never get enough chutney packets with my samosas.”

His father's voice cut in like a judge's gavel. “That is not thinking. That is laziness dressed up as philosophy.”

Before Kabir could counter, his maasi — visiting from Pune, armed with gossip and unsolicited advice — piped up. “Arre, forget chutney, I was just telling your mother! Do you know Ritika Sharma is back from Singapore? Such a bright girl, handling those big international accounts now.”

Kabir froze mid-bite. The name landed like a pebble dropped into still water, rippling through his chest.

Maasi leaned in, her bangles clinking. “Remember how close you two were, Kabir? Always laughing, always together. You should have seen her at the wedding last week — stunning, confident, so... sorted.”

His father perked up, clearly delighted at this rare chance to join forces with maasi. “Yes, yes. That Ritika was a diamond. If you had settled with her, maybe by now you’d have some sense of responsibility.”

Kabir cleared his throat, forcing a laugh. “Please, that was ages ago. She probably doesn’t even remember me.”

His mother gave him a knowing smile as she set down another paratha. “Oh, she remembers. She came to meet me last month. Asked about you. Said you haven’t changed at all.”

Kabir winced. Haven’t changed at all. Was that a compliment or a curse?

Maasi chuckled, wagging her finger. “See? Some girls don’t forget so easily. Maybe the universe is giving you a second chance.”

Kabir muttered under his breath, “Or maybe she’ll run the other way screaming if the universe forces her to have lunch with me again.”

The table erupted in laughter, but Kabir’s smile was only half a smile. He drowned his thoughts in pickle, his heart beating just a little faster than before.

Some ghosts, it seemed, never left the dining table.



Chapter 2

The Collision

Mumbai mornings were their own genre of chaos—horns blaring, vendors shouting, and people running like the city itself had given them deadlines. Kabir, naturally, was late again.

He had woken up at ten, convinced he had “plenty of time.” The plan? Meet Rohan at Church gate for brunch, then maybe hit Marine Drive for guitar jamming. Instead, he found himself sprinting toward the station, hair sticking up, a backpack slung carelessly over one shoulder.

On the other side of the city, Naina was power-walking down the same station steps. She had a client presentation in Nariman Point, the kind of deal that could get her noticed by senior partners.

Her outfit was sharp, her files meticulously stacked in her laptop bag, her watch ticking in perfect sync with her schedule.

If Kabir was the kind of man who measured time by how many songs he could hum in the shower, Naina was the kind who measured it in quarter-hours and colored sticky notes.

Two worlds. One crowded platform.

It started, as many great disasters do, with a train rush.

The 10:45 local screeched into the platform, already overflowing with commuters.

The crowd surged forward like a tidal wave. Kabir, balancing his vada pav in one hand and his backpack in the other, tried to squeeze in. Behind him, Naina muttered under her breath, “Unbelievable. How does this city even function?”

Kabir didn’t hear her, too busy arguing with a man who had elbowed him. “Bhai, personal space! I know it’s Mumbai, but at least buy me dinner before you press this close!”

A ripple of laughter ran through the carriage. Naina rolled her eyes—great, a clown.

In the chaos, Kabir’s backpack and Naina’s sleek laptop bag—both black, both worn diagonally—got swapped. Neither noticed. Kabir plopped onto a seat, humming, while Naina found a corner, mentally rehearsing her presentation.

By the time they got off, the damage was done.

Later that afternoon, Kabir flopped onto his bed, unzipping the “backpack.” Instead of his notebook, guitar picks, and random receipts, he found a neatly stacked pile of documents, a silver laptop, and a planner with sticky notes screaming things like Client Call - 2:00 PM and Submit Proposal - URGENT.

“Arre wah,” Kabir muttered. “Looks like I’ve robbed an office.”

Curious, he flipped open the planner. Each page was an artwork of order—color-coded highlights, tiny neat handwriting. It was like staring at an alien artifact.

Then he found a post-it that said: Remember to breathe.

You've got this, Naina!

Kabir chuckled. "Naina. Must be the owner. Poor girl.

Probably panicking without this bag right now."

Meanwhile, Naina arrived at her office conference room and unzipped what she thought was her laptop bag—only to find... Kabir's chaos.



A half-eaten chocolate bar. Two guitar picks. Crumpled bills. A comic book. And, horrifyingly, a deodorant can rolling around at the bottom.

Her jaw dropped. "What... is THIS?"

Her colleague peeked in. "Naina, where's the presentation file?"

Her stomach flipped. "It's... it's not here."

She slammed the bag shut, her mind racing. Somewhere out there, an absolute idiot was walking around with her entire career in his hands.

Luckily, Kabir's wallet was in the bag, along with a visiting card he had once printed on a whim — "Kabir Mehra: Explorer of Life" with his phone number.

Naina dialed furiously.

On the other end, Kabir picked up, cheerful as ever. "Hello, you've reached Kabir Mehra, part-time philosopher, full-time dreamer. Who's this?"

"Where is my bag?!" Naina snapped.

Kabir blinked. "Wow, no hello, no small talk. Straight to shouting. I like the passion."

"Listen, Mr. Mehra or whoever you are—my laptop, my documents, everything is with you. And in return, I have your... trash."

"Trash?" Kabir sounded offended. "Excuse me, that's not trash. That's a limited-edition comic book and also very important receipts from Domino's. Sentimental value."

Naina groaned. "Meet me at once. Church gate station. Fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen? Arre, madam, have mercy. I was about to nap—"

"If my job is ruined, so is your nap!" she cut him off.

The line went dead.

Kabir stared at his phone. "Bossy, angry, and dramatic. Definitely not my type. But cute voice, though."

Fifteen minutes later, they faced each other on the station steps.

Kabir recognized her instantly—the sharp, determined eyes, the neatly pressed clothes, the way she stood like she was about to conquer the world. She, meanwhile, recognized him by the messy hair, careless grin, and the fact that he was eating ice cream at a time like this.

“You’re Naina?” Kabir asked, licking his cone.

“And you’re... the disaster who stole my bag,” she shot back.

“Stole? Please. The universe gave me your bag. Destiny, you know?”

“Destiny has bad taste.”

They exchanged bags. Naina snatched hers, checking every file like a surgeon double-checking instruments. Kabir, on the other hand, peeked inside his backpack and sighed dramatically. “My poor chocolate bar... it looks traumatized.”

Naina rolled her eyes. “Unbelievable.”

“You know, you should thank me,” Kabir said, falling into step beside her.

“For what?”

“For not selling your laptop on OLX. I’m very trustworthy.”

“That makes one of us,” she muttered.

“Arre, do not be so cold. We have shared bags now, technically we are bonded for life.”

Naina stopped, turning to him. “Listen, Mr. Kabir Mehra. I don’t have time for jokes. I have a career to build, unlike you.”

Kabir smirked. “Ouch. Harsh. But accurate.”

For a moment, their eyes met—hers full of exasperation, his twinkling with amusement.

The crowd bustled around them, but it felt like the city had paused to watch this unlikely pair.

Before leaving, Kabir called out, “Hey, Naina!”

She turned reluctantly.

“You’re welcome, by the way. For the safe return. And... good luck with your big job thing. I can tell you’ll nail it.”

Something in his tone—sincere beneath the teasing—made her pause. For a fraction of a second, her lips softened, almost a smile.

Almost.

Then she walked away briskly. “Goodbye, Kabir.”

Kabir watched her go, grinning. “Goodbye, Miss Spreadsheet Queen. Until destiny strikes again.”

Kabir later told his friends about “the scariest-yet-cutest girl” he had ever met. They teased him endlessly, but he couldn’t get her sharp eyes out of his head.

Naina, meanwhile, pushed the whole episode aside, burying herself in her work. But when she opened her planner that night, she found a small doodle on the corner page—someone had scribbled in Kabir’s messy handwriting: Smile more. It suits you.

She stared at it for a long moment, frowning... and then, despite herself, smiled.

That evening, Kabir slumped into his favorite Irani café booth, still grinning like an idiot. His friends—Rohan and Sameer—immediately picked up on it.

“Arre, Romeo, what’s with the smile? Found free WiFi or free pizza?” Sameer asked,

dunking a bun maska in chai.

Kabir stretched dramatically. “Gentlemen, today I met destiny.”

Rohan snorted. “Oh God, not again. Was it destiny last week when the pani puri girl ignored you?”

“This is different,” Kabir insisted. “She was... sharp. Like one of those people who carry rulers in their soul. Very serious, very ambitious. But also... cute when she was yelling at me.”

“Yelling?!” Sameer burst out laughing. “Of course. Only you would fall for a girl who shouted at you in public.”

Rohan leaned in, smirking. “What’s her name?”

Kabir pretended to think, though he remembered instantly. “Naina.”

Sameer whistled. “Naina, haan? Classic filmi name. Kabir and Naina... sounds like a Karan Johar trailer already. Next scene: rain dance on Marine Drive.”

Kabir threw a napkin at him. “Shut up. She’s definitely out of my league.

Corporate type. She probably dates guys who wear ties in their sleep.”

“Which means she’ll never survive a day with you,” Rohan teased. “But hey, I like this. At least she’s real and not another random Instagram crush.”

Kabir ignored them, gazing out at the crowded street, still replaying Naina’s exasperated eyes in his head.

Meanwhile, across town, Naina stormed into her flat, tossing the bag on her bed. Her roommate and best friend, Priya, was lounging in pajamas, face mask on, watching a soap opera rerun.

“You won’t believe the day I had,” Naina began, pacing.

Priya muted the TV. “Spill.”

Naina launched into the story—missing files, chaos at Churchgate, and finally, him.

“He was standing there... eating ice cream! ICE CREAM! While I was on the verge of a professional meltdown. And do you know what he said? That destiny wanted us to swap bags. Destiny!”

Priya burst out laughing. “Oh my God, that’s hilarious. Did you slap him?”

“No, but I wanted to.” Naina crossed her arms. “He’s the most irresponsible man I’ve ever met.”

Priya raised an eyebrow. “And yet... you’re telling me about him. In great detail.”

Naina froze. “What? No! I’m just—venting.”

Priya smirked knowingly. “Of course. Venting. But Naina, be careful. Sometimes the people who irritate you the most... are the ones who end up mattering the most.”

Naina rolled her eyes. "This isn't a movie, Priya."

Still, later that night, when she opened her planner and saw Kabir's scribbled doodle—Smile more. It suits you—she stared longer than she wanted to admit. And yes, she smiled.

At around the same time, Kabir lay sprawled on his bed, strumming his guitar absentmindedly. For some reason, meeting Naina reminded him of his college crush, Ananya.

Back then, Ananya had been the class topper, always scolding Kabir for missing lectures.

He'd once shown up late to an exam and cracked a joke about "traffic being his real subject."

Ananya had rolled her eyes—exactly the way Naina had earlier. Kabir chuckled.

"I have a type. Smart girls who hate my guts."

But Naina... she was sharper, more put together.

And unlike Ananya, she hadn't laughed even once. That bugged him. He made people laugh. That was his thing.

"I'll make her laugh someday," he muttered to himself, as if it were a mission.

Lying in bed, Naina's mind drifted too. She remembered her college debate team days—when she had been giving a fiery speech about discipline and strategy, and her teammates had tried to lighten the mood by cracking jokes.

Once, a boy in the audience had interrupted with a one-liner, making everyone laugh. Naina had been furious.

Afterward, her professor had teased, “You’ll meet many Kabirs in life, beta. Don’t let them shake your focus.”

Now, she thought ruefully, If only that professor knew I’d literally meet one someday.

A few days later, as fate would have it, Kabir and Naina nearly crossed paths again. Kabir was performing at a small café gig—his friends cheering loudly as he sang a goofy mash-up of Bollywood songs.

Naina, coincidentally, had chosen the same café to meet a client. She walked in, focused on her notes, barely glancing at the stage. Kabir, blinded by the stage lights, didn’t see her either.

But when the waiter delivered Naina’s coffee, he spilled a bit on her file. “Oh no, ma’am, sorry!” he panicked.

Naina sighed, grabbing tissues. At the same moment, Kabir cracked a joke into the mic:

“See, even waiters get nervous around strong women.

I should start carrying tissues on stage.” The crowd laughed. Naina looked up sharply.

For a moment, her eyes flicked to the stage—and she froze.

That face. That grin. Him.

Kabir, still unaware, strummed his guitar and launched into another song.

Naina muttered under her breath, “Oh, not again.”

As she left the café, she made a mental note: Avoid Kabir Mehra at all costs.

Meanwhile, Kabir came offstage, buzzing with energy. His friends patted him on the back.

“Bro, you killed it! And did you see that serious-looking girl in the corner? She looked like she hated you!”

Kabir frowned. “Serious-looking girl? Wait—where?”

“Corner table, left side. She left just now.”

Kabir’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me...”

Destiny was clearly not done with them yet.



Chapter 3

Strings Attached

In India, weddings were less about the bride and groom and more about the endless guest lists that somehow linked strangers together. That's how Kabir and Naina's paths tangled again—at the wedding of Rohan's cousin, which, by some twist of fate, also happened to be Naina's colleague's sister's big day.

Kabir, dragged there by Rohan, was already sulking. “Yaar, shaadi ka matlab bas khana hota hai. Don't expect me to sit through any rituals.”

Rohan smirked. “Relax. Maybe you'll find your dulhan here.”

“Ha! My dulhan probably ran away after seeing my bank balance.” Kabir stuffed a laddoo in his mouth.

Meanwhile, Naina walked in with her colleague Priya, graceful in a navy lehenga, clutching her gift bag like a trophy. “Remember, Priya, we're here for an hour. Eat, greet, leave. I have a presentation tomorrow morning.”

Priya winked. “Unless something—or someone—distracts you.”

“Not happening,” Naina muttered.

Kabir was at the buffet counter, balancing three plates because “why waste time with multiple trips?” As fate would script it, he turned too quickly—and bumped straight into Naina. A

ladle of paneer tikka masala sloshed dangerously close to her dupatta.

“Seriously?!” Naina snapped, stepping back.

Kabir blinked, then grinned. “Well, well, Spreadsheet Queen. I was wondering when destiny would show up again.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Of all the weddings in Mumbai, why this one?”

“Because God clearly has a sense of humor,” Kabir said, still holding three plates like a circus act.

Before Naina could walk away, Priya swooped in. “Oh! You’re Kabir? She told me all about you.”

Naina choked. “I did not!”

Priya smirked. “She did. Bag swap guy, ice-cream eater, comic relief of Mumbai.”

Kabir clasped his hands dramatically. “Finally, recognition.”

Rohan joined in, clapping Kabir’s shoulder. “Naina, right? Kabir’s been daydreaming about you since Churchgate. Don’t let his ‘destiny’ speeches fool you.”

Naina glared at Kabir. Kabir gave a sheepish grin.

“Great,” she muttered. “Now it’s a group conspiracy.”

Weddings in India always led to one inevitable thing: forced dance. The DJ announced, “Couples to the dance floor!” before anyone could protest.

Priya shoved Naina forward. “Go, live a little!”

Rohan did the same to Kabir. “Bro, this is your SRK moment.”

And so, to Naina's utter horror, she and Kabir found themselves under fairy lights, surrounded by cheering relatives, awkwardly holding hands.

The song was soft, filmi, romantic. Kabir leaned in conspiratorially. "Don't worry. I only step on feet occasionally."

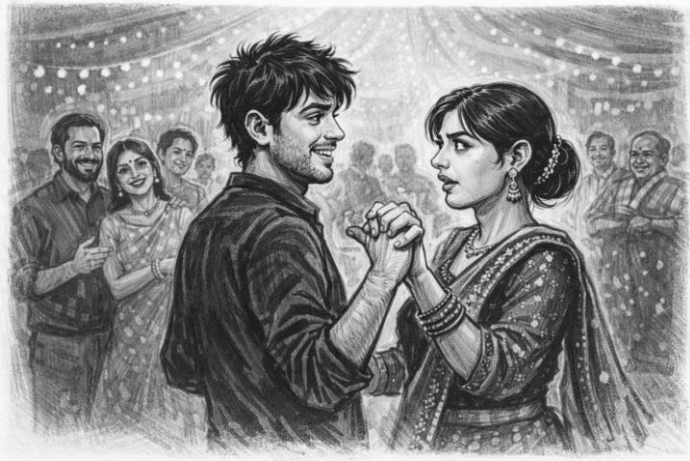
"Occasionally?" Naina hissed. "I swear, if you—ouch!"

"Sorry, that one was on purpose." He grinned.

Despite herself, Naina laughed. Just a small, involuntary chuckle—but Kabir noticed. His grin widened. "Aha! Victory. You laughed."

Naina quickly masked it with a scowl. "Don't get used to it."

But the moment lingered, soft as the music, until the song ended.



As they walked off the floor, Kabir said, "Admit it, we're like every Bollywood cliché: boy meets girl at station, boy meets

girl at café, boy meets girl at shaadi. Next stop—airport reunion.”

Naina shook her head. “This is real life, Kabir. Not a film.”

“Arre, real life is the best film,” he replied.

For a second, she looked at him—really looked—and realized he wasn’t just a joker. Beneath the chaos, there was warmth. Carefree, yes, but also kind.

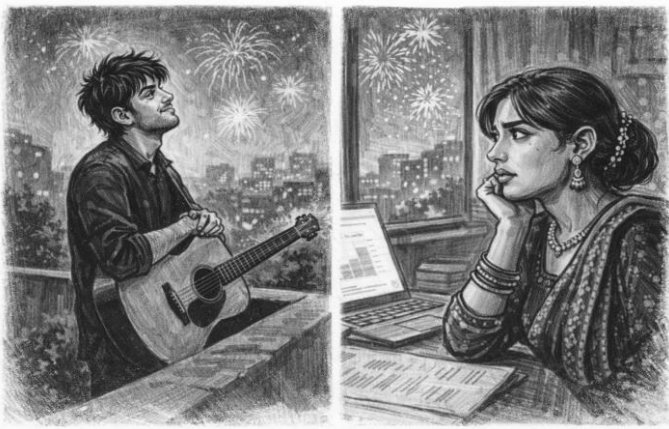
And that scared her more than his jokes.

Later that night, as firecrackers burst outside, Kabir found himself humming on the terrace, thinking of Naina’s reluctant laugh.

Naina, in her room, tried to focus on her presentation slides—but the echo of Kabir’s grin and the feel of his clumsy hand in hers kept intruding.

Neither wanted to admit it. But the strings had been tied.

And like in every great Bollywood story, once the strings are tied, they only tighten.



Chapter 4

Destined Detours

Two weeks passed after the wedding, and life should have gone back to normal. At least for Naina. Her days were still measured in meetings, reports, and alarm clocks. For Kabir, life was still a series of late mornings, long guitar sessions, and teasing lectures from his parents about “doing something serious.”

But fate, clearly, wasn’t done.

It came in the form of a surprise assignment. Naina’s firm had bagged a major client—an international education startup. The project required collaboration with a local creative consultant, someone who could add a touch of “youthful relatability” to their campaign.

When the email landed in Naina’s inbox, she skimmed it quickly, sipping her morning chai. Then she froze.

The consultant’s name: Kabir Mehra.

She almost spilled her tea. “No. Absolutely not.”

Kabir, meanwhile, received the call from his friend Rohan, who had casually recommended him. “Bro, congrats! You’re going to be working with one of the best analysts in the city. Big deal, yaar. Don’t mess it up.”

“Analyst? Sounds boring.” Kabir yawned.

“Her name is Naina.”

Kabir shot up. “Wait—Naina? Spreadsheet Queen Naina?”

“That’s the one.”

Kabir nearly dropped his guitar. “Oh ho... destiny is obsessed with me!”

The first official meeting was a spectacle in itself. Naina walked into the conference room, laptop and files in hand, every inch the professional. Kabir strolled in ten minutes late, carrying just a notepad with doodles on the cover.

“Mr. Mehra,” Naina said, her tone like ice. “You’re late.”

“Traffic,” Kabir lied smoothly.

“It’s Sunday.”

Kabir grinned. “Then cosmic traffic.”

Their boss clapped his hands. “Great! Kabir, Naina, you’ll be working closely on this. We need structure and creativity. Perfect balance.”

Naina’s jaw tightened. Perfect imbalance, more like.

As they began brainstorming, the clash was immediate.

Naina: “We need a clear three-month roadmap.”

Kabir: “Roadmaps are boring. Let’s improvise!”

Naina: “Data shows this demographic prefers structured study guides.”

Kabir: “Data also shows people eat ice cream for breakfast sometimes. Doesn’t mean it’s wrong.”

Naina: "That's not how research works."

Kabir: "That's not how fun works."

By the end of the meeting, Naina had a headache, and Kabir had three new doodles in his notebook titled "Grumpy Boss Lady."

But in the chaos, something worked. His silly slogans actually complemented her crisp analysis. Her bullet points gave direction to his wild ideas. Together, reluctantly, they were... effective.

Late that evening, as they stayed back to finish slides, the office power tripped for a few minutes. The room plunged into semi-darkness, lit only by emergency lamps.

Naina groaned. "Perfect. Just what I needed."

Kabir, leaning back in his chair, strummed his fingers on the table like a rhythm. "Relax, Spreadsheet Queen. Think of it as ambience."

She shot him a glare. But then, to her own surprise, she laughed softly. "You're ridiculous."

He grinned. "And you smiled. Again. Careful, it's becoming a habit."

For a second, their eyes held in the dim light. The noise of the city outside faded, and for once, silence between them didn't feel heavy.

The power flicked back on, breaking the spell. Naina quickly looked away. "Let's get this done."

But Kabir was still smiling.

Later, as Naina packed her bag, Priya texted her: How was the new project partner?

Naina typed back furiously: Infuriating. Then, after a pause, she added: ...but effective.

Meanwhile, Kabir messaged Rohan: She laughed again. That's twice. Told you, destiny.

And just like that, their detours stopped feeling accidental. They were now officially tied to the same path—whether they liked it or not.



Chapter 5

Lights, Laughter, and Hidden Shadows

The lane outside Kabir's house had transformed overnight. Strings of fairy lights looped from balcony to balcony like glowing necklaces. The smell of frying gujiyas and freshly lit diyas floated through the air, blending with the faint crackle of fireworks in the distance. Children dashed about with sparklers, their squeals echoing across the neighborhood.

Kabir, of course, was still half-asleep.

"Beta, at least wear proper clothes!" his mother, Mrs. Malhotra, shouted from the kitchen. She had her hair pinned in a bun, her saree a crisp shade of maroon, and an expression that could command an entire battalion.

"I am wearing proper clothes," Kabir called out lazily, stepping into the living room in an old cricket jersey and tracks.

His younger cousin Riya, perched on the sofa with a plate of samosas, burst out laughing. "Yeah, bhai, very festive. Adidas ka Diwali collection, I see."

Kabir smirked. "Comfort is culture, little one."

“Don’t call me little one! I’m twenty now,” Riya snapped, tossing a cushion at him. She was sharp-tongued, quick to laugh, and had inherited the family gene for mischief.

“Kabir!” his father’s booming voice cut through the chaos. Mr. Malhotra, dignified in a neatly pressed kurta, entered with the gravity of a headmaster.

“Guests are coming. Relatives are coming. Today is Diwali. Can you not, for once, look like a man and not like a... like a—”

“Like a failed cricketer at a press conference?” Riya offered helpfully.

Kabir gave her a mock bow. “Thank you, thank you. I’ll add that to my CV.”

The doorbell rang. The sound set off a flurry—Mrs. Malhotra rushing to the door, Riya running to adjust her dupatta, Mr. Malhotra straightening the sweets tray. Kabir strolled lazily behind them, still chewing on a piece of kaju katli.

And there she was.

Naina stepped in with her family, her dupatta glimmering in soft gold, a diya-shaped earring catching the light. The saree she wore was simple but graceful, and the way she tucked back a strand of hair behind her ear made Kabir—for once—forget to chew.

“Namaste, aunty, namaste uncle,” Naina said politely, folding her hands.

Riya muttered under her breath, “Arre wah, Miss India aa gayi.”

Kabir nudged her. “Shut up,” he hissed, though his eyes never left Naina.

Beside Naina stood a tall, boyishly handsome guy in a kurta—Sameer. Childhood friend, the kind who carried himself with an ease that made everyone like him.

He greeted Kabir with a hearty grin and a “Bro, finally we meet!” before pulling him into a hug

as though they were long-lost cousins.

Kabir blinked. “Uh, do I know you?”

“No, but Naina talks about her office a lot. So indirectly, I know you,” Sameer replied smoothly. Naina shot him a glare.

Behind them entered Naina’s parents, gracious and smiling, followed by two more new faces. One was Kabir’s Chachi-ji, resplendent in a heavily embroidered saree, who immediately took charge of offering sweets and shedding emotional tears about “family togetherness.” The other was Ayaan—Riya’s friend visiting from London.

He had an easy grin, dressed in a kurta but carried himself like he was at a cocktail party.

“Ah, the great Kabir,” Ayaan said with a teasing tone, shaking his hand. “Riya’s told me a lot. I can’t wait to see if half the stories are true.”

Kabir groaned. “Riya, what have you been telling people?”

“Only the truth,” Riya sang sweetly.

As the evening stretched, the courtyard filled with laughter, crackers, and the hum of relatives chatting. Children ran

about lighting sparklers, the older uncles debated politics, and the women clustered around the sweets table.

Kabir, predictably, tried to impress by lighting a giant rocket firecracker.

“Stand back,” he declared, holding the rocket at an angle. “Physics is with me tonight.”

“Physics will slap you tonight,” Riya muttered.

He lit the fuse. For a moment, it sizzled dramatically. Then, instead of soaring into the sky, the rocket spun sideways, chasing half the family into the veranda.

“KABIR!” Mrs. Malhotra’s shriek rang louder than the explosion.

Sweets went flying, uncles dove for cover, and the rocket finally smashed into a clay pot with a sad little poof. The courtyard fell silent for three seconds before bursting into roars of laughter.

“Wow,” Sameer clapped slowly. “If the job thing doesn’t work out, bro, you can join NASA.”

Kabir brushed imaginary dust from his shoulder. “Every scientist has failures.”

From the corner of his eye, he caught Naina stifling a laugh, trying to stay composed. The sight made his embarrassment... oddly worth it.

The festivities moved indoors for the evening aarti. Diyas lined the mandir, casting soft golden glows on everyone’s faces. Chachi-ji, already teary-eyed, led the prayers with

dramatic gusto. Kabir stood at the back, mumbling half the lines, earning a sharp nudge from his father.

After the rituals, when the guests mingled, the inevitable happened.

“Kabir beta,” one uncle said loudly, “so what are you doing these days? Something... settled, I hope?”

The living room went uncomfortably quiet.

Kabir forced a grin. “Exploring opportunities, uncle. You know, keeping options open.”

Mr. Malhotra’s jaw tightened. “Exploring opportunities? He means sleeping till noon and wasting time with his friends. No focus, no discipline.”

“Arre, don’t be so harsh,” Chachi-ji intervened with a sigh. “He’s young. But yes, Kabir, you must think of your future. Everyone is moving ahead. Even Naina beta here, so ambitious, so hardworking...”

Naina shifted uncomfortably as all eyes flicked to her. Kabir felt a hot flush of shame rise up his neck.

“Enough,” Kabir muttered, his smile vanishing. “Not everyone has to be like Naina, okay?”

The silence grew heavier. Riya opened her mouth to crack a joke but thought better of it. Sameer tried to distract with a story, but Kabir had already turned away, walking briskly toward the balcony.

Kabir leaned on the railing, the muffled laughter of relatives drifting from behind him, but his own chest felt tight. He

hated these moments—the constant comparisons, the nagging reminder that he wasn't enough.

A soft voice broke his thoughts. "You okay?"

He turned. Naina stood at the balcony doorway, holding a sparkler. Her face glowed in the flickering light.

Kabir smirked weakly. "What, come to give me another lecture? Add to the list?"

"Actually no," Naina said simply, stepping closer. "I came to say... I get it. People expect too much sometimes. Or they forget you're trying in your own way."

Kabir raised an eyebrow. "Wow. Miss Perfect sympathizes with the lazy guy."

Naina rolled her eyes. "Don't flatter yourself. I just... I saw your face in there. It wasn't fair."

For a long moment, they stood in silence, the sparkler fizzing between them. Then Naina held it out.

"Here," she said softly. "Light one. It'll make you feel better."

Kabir chuckled, taking it. "You know, you're not as scary as you look in the office."

"And you're not as hopeless as you pretend," Naina replied.

Their eyes met—just for a second too long—before a loud shout interrupted.

"Arre wah! Kabir and Naina on a balcony, kya baat hai!" Riya's voice rang out, followed by Ayaan's laugh and Sameer's teasing whistle.

Kabir groaned. Naina flushed red, snapping, “Grow up, you guys!” before storming back inside.

But Kabir stayed at the balcony, staring at the dying sparkler in his hand.

For the first time in a long while, something inside him flickered too.

Later that night, when the guests had left and the courtyard was littered with spent crackers and sweet wrappers, Kabir lay on his bed, replaying the evening.

Sameer’s easy smile. Ayaan’s sly remarks. Chachi-ji’s tears. Riya’s relentless teasing.

And Naina—Naina, who had looked at him not with judgment, but with... something else.

Maybe sympathy. Maybe understanding. Maybe more.

Kabir didn’t know what it meant. But for once, he didn’t mind not knowing.

Outside, the last fireworks lit up the sky, bursting in gold and silver. And Kabir, staring out his window, whispered to himself with a grin,

“Happy Diwali, indeed.”



Chapter 6

A Day in the Lanes of Mumbai

The Monday morning after Diwali had that peculiar heaviness—the kind where the city smelled faintly of burnt crackers, and people dragged themselves to work with sleepy eyes and overstuffed stomachs. Naina, though, looked as crisp as the fresh notepad she carried. Dressed in a pale blue kurti, her dupatta neatly pinned, she walked into the office conference room like she had slept eight perfect hours.

Kabir stumbled in five minutes later, still scratching his head, a faint trace of kaju katli on his lips.

“Beta, did you come from a Diwali party or from bed?” their manager, Mr. Sharma, muttered.

Kabir yawned. “Both, sir.”

The room chuckled. Naina rolled her eyes. Same old Kabir.

Sharma cleared his throat. “Listen. The client needs on-ground surveys for the new campaign. Someone has to visit the printing unit in Byculla, then check a vendor in Dharavi. Can’t depend on couriers for this one. Any volunteers?”

The silence was loud. Nobody wanted to brave Mumbai traffic on a Monday. Naina’s hand, disciplined as ever, shot up.

“I’ll do it,” she said.

Sharma beamed. "Excellent. Take someone with you. It's too much running for one person."

Before Naina could suggest a colleague, Riya—who had shown up at the office under the pretext of "interning"—piped up with evil glee. "Take Kabir! He has so much... free time."

Kabir glared at her. "Traitor."

"Done," Sharma said before Kabir could protest. "Kabir, Naina—you two handle it. Report tomorrow."

Naina didn't argue. Kabir, on the other hand, slumped in his chair like a man sentenced to hard labor.

By noon, the two of them were navigating the chaos of Byculla. The taxi ride had been twenty minutes of silence punctuated only by Kabir humming random Bollywood songs under his breath. Naina finally snapped.

"Can you not?"

"Not what?"

"Sing like a broken radio."

Kabir grinned. "Ah, but madam, this broken radio is playing love songs just for you."

She shot him a death stare. He laughed, then leaned out of the window to shout at a passing vendor. "Bhaiya! Ek cutting chai, do vada pav side mein bhejo!"

"Kabir! We're in a cab!"

"Relax. Networking with vendors is market research," he said solemnly.

By the time they reached the narrow lanes of Byculla, Naina had a throbbing headache. The printing press was tucked away in a crumbling building with paint peeling off the walls. Kabir, however, looked thrilled.

“Wah, kya heritage vibes hain!” he declared. “Feels like one of those old Govinda movies.”

Inside, the manager explained the technical details while Naina furiously scribbled notes. Kabir wandered around, touching machines, asking absurd questions.

“This ink smells like... destiny,” he announced at one point.

“Stop embarrassing yourself,” Naina muttered, pulling him back.

But the workers, amused by his antics, offered them cutting chai. And Kabir, chatting in fluent Bambaiya slang, had the entire press laughing within minutes.

Naina watched quietly. He was ridiculous—but people liked him. It wasn’t effort, it was just... him.

Their next stop was the vendor in Dharavi. By now the sun was sharp, the lanes narrow, and the traffic merciless. They decided to take an auto.

“Bhaiya, Dharavi chaloge?” Kabir asked.

“Meter se,” the driver said.

Kabir puffed his chest. “Meter hi lagao. Hum bhi gareeb hain.”

Naina buried her face in her dupatta, wishing she could vanish.

The auto rattled through chaotic lanes—shops overflowing with fabrics, leather goods, food stalls. The noise was overwhelming, but Kabir looked like a kid in Disneyland.

“Look at this energy! I love Mumbai!” he shouted over the honking. “Every corner has life!”

“Every corner has traffic,” Naina corrected. They finally found the vendor, a wiry man named Iqbal who welcomed them with chai and stories about his decades in business.

Kabir listened with fascination, nodding like an old friend, while Naina asked pointed questions and filled forms.

When it was time to leave, a sudden drizzle began. Within seconds, the narrow street was alive with umbrellas, people running for shelter, vendors covering their goods with tarpaulin.

Kabir tilted his face up, letting raindrops hit him. “Ah, filmy rain! All we need is a song now.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Naina warned.

But he was already humming loudly: “Tip tip barsa paani...”

“Shut up!” she hissed, but couldn’t stop herself from laughing.

They ducked under a small tea stall awning, the rain hammering down. The smell of fresh bhajiyas filled the air. Kabir ordered two plates before Naina could protest.

“I don’t eat fried food,” she said.

“Today you do,” he insisted, handing her one. “Diwali calories don’t count. It’s law.”

Reluctantly, she bit into a hot bhajiya—and couldn't hide her smile.

As they waited out the rain, a little boy ran past, barefoot, splashing through puddles. He slipped and dropped a bundle of papers. The crowd moved past indifferently. Kabir immediately darted out into the rain, scooping up the scattered sheets.

"Arre, careful champ!" he said, handing them back. "Homework?"

The boy shook his head. "Bills. My father's shop."

Kabir ruffled his hair and pressed a fifty-rupee note into his hand.

"Buy yourself some shoes."

The boy's eyes widened. He nodded shyly and ran off.

Naina, watching from under the awning, felt something shift inside her. Kabir returned soaked, grinning like an idiot, shaking water from his hair.

"What?" he asked when he noticed her staring.

"Nothing," she said softly. "You're just... not what you seem sometimes."

He winked. "Layers, madam. I'm like a paratha."

She burst out laughing despite herself.

By the time they finished their errands, it was late evening. Instead of heading straight back, Kabir convinced the auto driver to detour to Marine Drive.

"Work-life balance," he declared, dragging Naina along.

The sky was streaked with pink and orange, waves crashing gently against the stones. Couples sat in clusters, sipping coconut water, whispering into each other's ears.

Naina sat stiffly, clutching her bag. Kabir sprawled beside her, arms behind his head.

"You know," he said, "one day you'll thank me for showing you how to live a little."

She snorted. "Or regret wasting my time."

"Same thing," he replied with a grin.

They sat in silence as the sun dipped lower. Naina stole a glance at him. For once, he wasn't

joking or humming or being ridiculous. He just stared at the horizon, his face calm, almost thoughtful.

It startled her—the possibility that behind the clown, there was someone who felt deeply.

"Hey," he said suddenly, turning to her. "If you could be anywhere right now, where would you be?"

Naina thought for a moment. "New York. At Columbia. Pursuing my MBA."

"Big dreams," Kabir nodded. "Nice. Me? I'd be right here."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because... this moment's not so bad. The rain smell, the sunset, your company—even if you pretend you hate it."

Her breath caught. She looked away quickly, pretending to watch the waves.

The ride back was quiet. Naina tapped out notes on her phone, Kabir dozed off with his head lolling dangerously close to her shoulder. For a moment, she considered nudging him away. Instead, she let him rest.

When they finally reached her house, he blinked awake. "Hmm? We home?"

"I'm home," she corrected.

He grinned sleepily. "Best field trip ever."

Rolling her eyes, she climbed out of the auto. But as she walked to her gate, she felt a strange warmth lingering. A day that should have been exhausting had somehow... lightened her heart.

Upstairs, Kabir leaned back in the auto, smiling to himself. He didn't know why—but today felt like the beginning of something.

And somewhere in the chaos of Mumbai's lanes, a spark had quietly been lit.

The city moved on as if nothing had changed. Trains rattled, office meetings droned, deadlines loomed. But for Kabir and Naina, something small had shifted—quietly, like a diya flame in a corner no one noticed at first.

Kabir found himself humming more than usual, grinning at his phone for no reason, replaying the rain-soaked laughter under the tea-stall awning. Naina, on the other hand, buried herself in her planner as if doubling her schedules could erase the memory of Kabir's words at Marine Drive. "This moment's not so bad... your company—even if you pretend you hate it."

She caught herself smiling in the middle of a boardroom presentation and quickly masked it. He caught himself checking the office clock, wondering if she'd pass his desk. Neither admitted anything. Not to themselves, not to anyone else.

And yet, fate—or maybe just nosy friends and family—was already laying the next trap. A gathering was coming. Lights, laughter, and a night where secrets could almost tumble out.

Because sometimes, love doesn't arrive with fireworks. Sometimes, it lingers like a half-finished sentence—waiting for the right occasion to be spoken.



Chapter 7

The Almost Confession awaited

The Malhotra house hadn't fully recovered from Diwali yet—half-burnt crackers still lay in the courtyard, fairy lights blinked on stubbornly, and the faint smell of smoke lingered in the air. But that didn't stop Mrs. Malhotra from organizing a “Diwali Milan”—a get-together for family,

friends, and anyone remotely connected to the Malhotras.

“Arre, it's tradition,” she said, bustling through the living room, rearranging cushions. “Diwali isn't complete without everyone coming together after.”

“Translation,” Riya muttered to Kabir, “she just wants to show off her new saree collection.”

Kabir smirked. “And trap me into singing in front of people again.”

“You should. It'll entertain them,” Riya teased.

Kabir groaned but secretly didn't mind. He liked these gatherings—the laughter, the food, the chaos. And tonight, there was an added incentive.

Naina was coming.

The evening began with relatives drifting in, balancing trays of sweets, gossip spilling faster than the chai. Sameer arrived

first, carrying a box of chocolates. He greeted everyone warmly, then found Naina as she walked in with her parents. She wore a simple yellow salwar suit this time, her hair loose around her shoulders.

Kabir nearly dropped the plate of pakoras he was holding.

Riya nudged him hard. "Stop staring, bhai. She'll think you're a streetlight."

Kabir coughed, trying to look casual, but Naina's eyes had already met his. She gave him a polite nod before turning to greet Mrs. Malhotra.

Sameer stuck close to her, cracking jokes, making her laugh. Kabir watched from the corner, irritation bubbling like unopened soda.

"Problem?" Ayaan asked, appearing beside him with a mischievous grin.

"None," Kabir said quickly.

"Good. Because if you don't do something soon, Sameer will," Ayaan replied, sipping his drink.

Kabir muttered something unprintable and stalked off.

As the evening settled, music floated through the house. Someone suggested antakshari, and soon the uncles and aunties were singing old Kishore Kumar numbers while kids giggled at the wrong lyrics.

Then, as if on cue, Riya clapped her hands. "Bhai! Your turn. Everyone, Kabir will sing!"

The room erupted in cheers. Kabir tried to protest, but there was no escape. He was shoved forward, guitar in hand.

He glanced at Naina—she was seated beside Sameer, arms crossed, clearly expecting him to goof off. Something in her expression—half amused, half dismissive—made him straighten.

This time, he didn't joke. He strummed softly, his voice steady. The song was lighthearted but warm, the kind of melody that made people smile without realizing.

His eyes, however, kept drifting toward Naina.

And for the first time, she didn't look away.

When he finished, the room burst into applause. Chachi-ji cried. "My Kabir is so talented! See, beta, you could be a star!"

Kabir bowed dramatically, but inside, his chest thudded. Because Naina was clapping too—slow, thoughtful, like she had seen a version of him no one else did.

As food was served, the teasing began.

"So, Kabir and Naina," Riya announced loudly at the dinner table, "you've been spending a lot of time together, haan?"

Naina nearly choked on her pulao. Kabir glared at Riya. "Shut up."

Sameer laughed. "Why shut up? It's true, isn't it? The office project, the field trip..."

"Just work," Naina said firmly.

"Just work?" Riya arched an eyebrow. "Then why is bhai suddenly dressing better?"

Everyone chuckled. Kabir sputtered. "I always dress well!"

Ayaan leaned in, smirking. “I don’t know about dressing, but I’ve noticed he checks his phone a lot more these days.”

The laughter grew louder. Naina flushed red. Kabir threw his napkin at Riya, who was giggling uncontrollably.

Later, as the house buzzed with chatter, Naina slipped away to the rooftop for some fresh air. The city stretched out before her, glittering with post-Diwali lights, the sea of buildings glowing like another galaxy.

She didn’t expect Kabir to follow.

“Hey,” he said softly, joining her. “Needed a break too?”

She nodded. “It gets... loud downstairs.”

They stood side by side, the night breeze cool against their faces. For a while, neither spoke. Then Kabir broke the silence.

“You know, I wasn’t joking earlier. About liking the small moments.”

Naina glanced at him. “You surprise me sometimes, Kabir.”

“Good surprise or bad?”

“Depends on the day,” she said with a small smile.

He laughed, then turned serious. “Naina, I... I know I’m not like you. You have goals, discipline, everything figured out. Me? I’m still... searching. But when I’m with you, I feel like maybe... maybe I can be more than just this confused guy.”

Her heart pounded. She opened her mouth, words rising—something between confession and denial.

But just then, Riya's voice rang out. "Oho! Found the lovebirds!"

They spun around. Riya, Ayaan, and Sameer stood at the doorway, grinning like devils.

Naina stepped back instantly, flustered. "We were just talking."

"Sure," Sameer said smoothly, though his eyes lingered on her with something unreadable.

Kabir clenched his fists, muttering, "Great timing, as always."

The night ended with more laughter, more sweets, and endless chatter. But Kabir and Naina barely spoke again.

As she left, Kabir caught her eye across the courtyard. It wasn't a smile, not exactly—but it wasn't nothing either.

And for both of them, the unsaid words hung heavy in the air, like diyas left burning long after the prayers were done.

Kabir's room looked like a cyclone had passed through. Shirts were flung on the bed, socks dangled from the chair, and his suitcase lay open with exactly two items inside—a pair of jeans and a cricket bat.

"Bhai, you're going abroad, not on a college trip to Lonavala," Riya said, standing in the doorway with her arms crossed.



“Where are your formal clothes? The seminar is not going to be impressed with your ‘lucky’ jeans.”

Kabir waved her off. “Relax, I’ll pack. How hard can it be? You just throw things in.”

Riya marched over, holding up the cricket bat. “Really? Are you planning to play gully cricket on Amsterdam’s canals?”

Kabir grinned sheepishly. “You never know...”

Meanwhile, Mrs. Malhotra was on the phone, telling every relative within a hundred-kilometer radius that her son was “going abroad for important work.”

It didn’t matter that Kabir hadn’t even looked at the seminar agenda. To her, this was no less than sending an astronaut to Mars.

Down the street, Naina’s packing looked like a military operation. Neatly folded clothes, documents in a folder, extra copies of her passport, emergency medicines.

Her mother fluttered around, worrying about everything from foreign food to Naina's ability to find Indian tea abroad.

"Ma, it's Amsterdam, not a jungle," Naina reassured. "They'll have tea."

Her mother still tucked a small packet of masala chai into her bag, "just in case."

The morning of departure was chaos.

At the airport, Kabir's family arrived in full strength, waving like he was going off to war. Riya filmed him while Ayaan cracked jokes about Kabir being deported within a week.

"Make India proud, bhai," Riya teased.

"Try not to flirt with the immigration officer."

"I'm charming, not reckless," Kabir said with mock dignity.

Then, spotting the officer's stern face at the counter, he muttered, "Okay maybe reckless."

Naina, already at the gate with her laptop bag, watched the spectacle with a mixture of horror and reluctant amusement.

How was she supposed to survive a week in a foreign country with this man-child?

And yet, as they boarded the flight, a tiny flicker of anticipation sparked in her chest.

For Kabir, it wasn't anticipation—it was unfiltered excitement.

The unknown stretched ahead, shimmering like the canals he had only seen in postcards.

Amsterdam awaited.



Chapter 8

Love in a Foreign Language

The flight had barely taken off when Kabir was already shifting in his seat for the fifteenth time.

“Do you have ants in your pants?”

Naina asked dryly, not looking up from her book.

“I can’t sit still for eight hours!” Kabir groaned, stretching theatrically. “My body isn’t designed for captivity.”

“Then maybe don’t act like you’re in a jail cell,” she muttered, adjusting her seatbelt.

But Kabir wasn’t listening. He was poking around at the seat-back screen, muttering about movies, snacks, and “where’s the button that gives free wine?” The passengers in the row behind him glared.

By hour two, he had spilled juice on his shirt, pressed the call button twice by accident, and tried to teach Naina how to play in-flight trivia. She ignored him until he leaned over, whispering like it was a state secret:

“Between you and me, I think I’m winning.”

“You’re losing,” she replied without glancing away from her book.

“Semantics,” he shrugged.

But somewhere over Europe, after exhausting himself with chatter, Kabir dozed off mid-sentence. His head tipped sideways, landing squarely on Naina’s shoulder.

She stiffened at first, ready to shove him off. But his breathing slowed, soft and steady, and the childlike expression on his face made her pause. Against her better judgment, she let him stay there. Her lips twitched in the faintest smile before she turned back to her book, pretending she wasn’t secretly... comfortable.

The first thing Kabir noticed when they landed wasn’t the tall glass airport windows, the streams of passengers, or the pristine signs in Dutch. It was the bicycles.

“Look!” he cried, pointing outside as they wheeled their luggage out. “Cycles! Thousands of them! It’s like Tour de France but permanent!”

“Amsterdam,” Naina said calmly, dragging her suitcase. “The cycling capital of the world.”

“I feel like buying a bell and just ringing it randomly,” Kabir declared, eyes wide with wonder. “Ting-ting!”

“Please don’t embarrass India,” she muttered.

Getting to the hotel was another comedy sketch. Kabir fumbled with tram tickets, kept trying to wave euros like they were monopoly money, and narrowly avoided being run over by a cyclist. Naina handled everything: tickets, directions, check-in. Kabir just carried his cricket bat-shaped suitcase like it was Excalibur.

By the time they reached their hotel, Kabir was still buzzing. “This place is magical! Canals! Tulips! Stroop—stroopwaffle? Waffle of stroop?”

“Stroopwafel,” Naina corrected automatically.

“That’s what I said.”

She gave him a look. He grinned sheepishly, then promptly opened the minibar and gasped. “Naina! Tiny bottles of alcohol! This is luxury!”

“Step away from the minibar,” she warned.

The next morning, the grand seminar hall gleamed with polished wood, crisp name tags, and sharp suits. Naina walked in like she owned the place; laptop tucked under her arm; hair tied in a sleek bun.

Kabir, on the other hand, wore a blazer over a T-shirt that read Pizza is Life.

Naina nearly fainted.

“You cannot—”

“Relax,” he whispered. “It’s called casual confidence. Very European.”

She dragged him to their assigned seats, shooting him death stares. But as the sessions began, something unexpected happened.

While Naina scribbled meticulous notes, Kabir doodled. She wanted to strangle him—until during a coffee break, she overheard two foreign delegates laughing at Kabir’s jokes. He had somehow charmed them into swapping business cards.

“How... how did you do that?” she asked later, incredulous.

“I’m naturally lovable,” he said smugly.

“Or naturally irritating.”

“Same thing.”

Naina rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t deny it—his presence, chaotic as it was, had people smiling.

That evening, after hours of presentations, Naina wanted nothing more than to collapse into bed. But Kabir begged.

“Come on! We’re in Amsterdam! You can’t just sleep. Let’s explore.”

“I have to prepare for tomorrow’s panel.”

“Naina, please. Life is not only about panels. It’s about pancakes too.”

She sighed. Against her better judgment, she joined him.

They walked through cobbled streets lit with fairy lights, across bridges arching over canals where boats drifted lazily.

Kabir insisted on trying stroopwafels from a street vendor, grinning when the caramel oozed warm and sticky. He offered her a bite.

She refused at first, then caved. The sweetness melted on her tongue, and she admitted quietly, “Not bad.”

“See? I’m a man of culture.”

Moments later, Kabir nearly fell into the canal trying to take a selfie with a bicycle. Naina burst out laughing—a genuine,

unrestrained laugh that surprised even herself. Kabir stared at her, momentarily speechless.

“You should laugh more often,” he said softly.

She blinked, her smile fading into something more vulnerable. “Don’t get used to it.”

But she kept smiling anyway.

Later, they strolled along a quieter stretch of canal. The night air was crisp, the water shimmering with reflections of golden light. A violinist played softly in the distance, and the whole scene felt... cinematic.

Kabir slowed his steps. “You know, Naina... I don’t think I’ve ever felt this...” He hesitated, searching. “This... alive. And I think it’s because...”

Her heart pounded. She knew what was coming. She both wanted it and feared it.

“...because of Amsterdam!” he finished with a goofy grin.

She exhaled sharply.

“Kabir!”

“What?” he said innocently. “Amsterdam is beautiful! But also...” His voice lowered, serious now. “It’s better because you’re here.”

The words hung in the cool night air. Neither moved. Their eyes locked, and for a heartbeat, the world narrowed to just the two of them.

Naina felt something shift deep inside her—a tug she hadn’t wanted to name.

But before she could respond, a boat passed by with tourists shouting drunkenly in English, breaking the moment. Kabir chuckled awkwardly, scratching his neck. Naina looked away, cheeks warm.

They walked back in silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It was charged, heavy with the unspoken.

Back at the hotel, they parted at their doors. Kabir wanted to say something more, to close the gap, but the words stuck in his throat.

"Goodnight, Naina," he said instead, softer than usual.

She lingered, her hand on her door handle. "Goodnight, Kabir."

The door clicked shut, but both stood for a long time on either side, their hearts restless.

Because somewhere between spilled juice on the flight and stroopwafels by the canal, something had changed.

Something neither of them could ignore much longer.



Chapter 9

Lost and Found

The morning after the canal walk, Kabir woke up with the kind of smile that made Riya, if she had been there, say, “Uh-oh, bhai’s infected. Love-virus.”

He sprawled across the hotel bed, staring at the ceiling, reliving the image of Naina’s face framed by fairy lights, her eyes softer than he’d ever seen.

On the other side of the hotel corridor, Naina wasn’t smiling. She was restless. She kept replaying his words: “It’s better because you’re here.”

They weren’t a confession, not really. But the weight behind them unsettled her more than she cared to admit.

She had a presentation in three hours—why was she thinking about Kabir’s goofy grin instead of memorizing her lines?

When they bumped into each other at breakfast, the awkwardness was instant.

“Morning,” Kabir said, voice unusually careful.

“Morning,” Naina echoed, eyes fixed on her coffee.

A silence lingered. Kabir fumbled with his croissant. Naina stirred her cup as if it might reveal the day’s fortune. Finally, he blurted, “So, uh, about last night...”

Her head snapped up, panic flashing in her eyes.

“...the stroopwafel was amazing, right?” Kabir finished with a cheeky grin.

Naina let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Yes, Kabir. Incredible culinary discovery.”

Inside, Kabir sighed. Classic him—cowardly retreat into humor. But maybe humor was safer.

By the time they reached the seminar venue, Naina had flipped her professional switch back on. She looked sharp in a navy blazer, notes perfectly organized. Kabir, to her relief, at least ditched the “Pizza is Life” T-shirt.

Her panel presentation was flawless. She spoke with clarity, poise, and precision, earning nods from industry veterans. Kabir, watching from the audience, felt something stir inside him—a mix of admiration and intimidation.

She was... amazing.

Then came the group interaction. Kabir hadn’t prepared, obviously. But when one of the European hosts casually asked about “India’s youth market,” Kabir leaned forward and launched into an animated, unscripted speech.

He spoke about cricket fans, Bollywood’s hold on the heart, the way young Indians dream in English but argue in Hindi, and how brands missed the humor and chaos that truly connected. His words were clumsy, colloquial, but somehow real. People laughed, people listened. By the end, the host was scribbling notes, impressed.

Naina gaped at him. He hadn’t studied a single slide. But there he was, charming the room.

Later, as they walked out, she muttered, “You really are... impossible.”

He grinned. “You mean talented?”

“I mean infuriating.”

But her voice lacked bite.

“Okay,” Kabir announced that afternoon, clapping his hands. “We can’t be in Amsterdam and not ride bikes. It’s illegal.”

Naina hesitated. “We have the gala dinner tonight.

I don’t want to show up with a broken leg.”

“Trust me. I’m a natural.”

Five minutes later, Kabir crashed directly into a café’s outdoor table, sending cappuccinos flying.

The waitress screamed in Dutch, elderly tourists gasped, and Kabir sprawled on the cobblestones, mumbling, “Did I win?”

Naina rushed to his side, half concerned, half struggling not to laugh. “You’re insane.”

“You’re welcome,” he groaned, “for the free entertainment.”

She helped him up, and their hands brushed—warm, lingering a second too long.

Neither pulled away immediately. When they finally did, Kabir caught her half-hidden smile. It made the bruise on his knee completely worth it.

In the evening, with time before the gala, Kabir convinced Naina to hop onto a tram “just to see where it goes.”

Big mistake.

Half an hour later, they found themselves far outside the city center, surrounded by windmills, quiet canals, and hardly any people. Naina's phone battery was dead. Kabir's data plan had expired.

"You just had to experiment," she muttered, crossing her arms.

"Hey, it's called adventure," he replied. "We're basically explorers now. Columbus 2.0."

"Columbus got lost," she shot back.

"Exactly! History repeats."

Despite her annoyance, the countryside was stunning.

Fields of tulips stretched endlessly, and the sky glowed orange as the sun dipped low. They walked along a quiet lane, shoes crunching against gravel, the world hushed except for the wind.

And somewhere in that silence, the banter faded.

They found an old wooden bench at an empty tram stop. Kabir sat down, uncharacteristically subdued. Naina joined him. For a while, they just watched the water ripple under a nearby bridge.

"You know," Kabir began slowly, "sometimes I feel like I'm... drifting. Like everyone else is running this race with a clear finish line, and I'm just... walking in circles."

Naina turned, surprised by his tone.

"I joke around, act like I don't care," he continued, staring at his hands.

“But truth is, I don’t know what I’m doing with my life. Half the time, I’m scared people will realize I’m just... faking it.”

The vulnerability in his voice caught her off guard. She had never seen this Kabir—the one beneath the jokes.

Her throat tightened. “Kabir... I plan everything, you know that. Every step of my life. But sometimes... it feels like I’m hiding behind it.

Because if I stop planning, even for a second, I won’t know who I am either.”

He looked at her then, eyes wide.

“So maybe,” she whispered, “we’re both just... scared.”

The air between them shifted. The vulnerability was raw, unmasked. And in that moment, Kabir reached out, his hand brushing hers on the bench.

She didn’t pull away.

Their eyes locked, and the unspoken words filled the space— heavy, urgent, tender.

But just as Kabir leaned closer, headlights appeared.

The tram rumbled into the station, its brakes screeching. The spell shattered.

They withdrew their hands quickly, awkward, flustered.

“Uh... tram’s here,” Kabir mumbled.

“Yeah,” Naina said softly.

They boarded, silence heavy, each staring out at the fading countryside lights. But inside, both hearts beat too fast, too loud.

By the time they returned, dressed for the formal dinner, their earlier closeness lingered like a secret no one else could see.

Kabir fumbled with his tie, muttering about “choking devices,” and Naina reached over without thinking, adjusting it properly. Their faces were inches apart.

He whispered, “Thanks.”

She didn’t reply, but the warmth in her eyes was answer enough.

At the gala, they mingled with colleagues and delegates, but every laugh, every glance, every brush of their shoulders carried that weight of something more. Something waiting.

Later that night, back in the hotel corridor, Kabir paused at her door. “Naina... today, I...” He stopped.

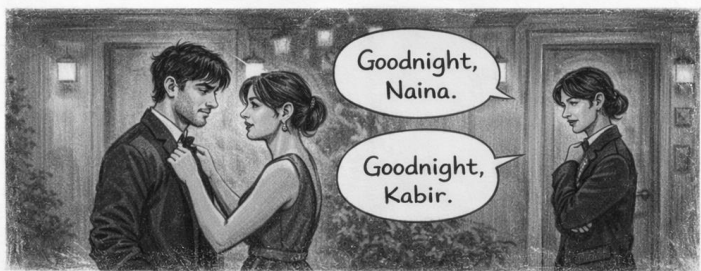
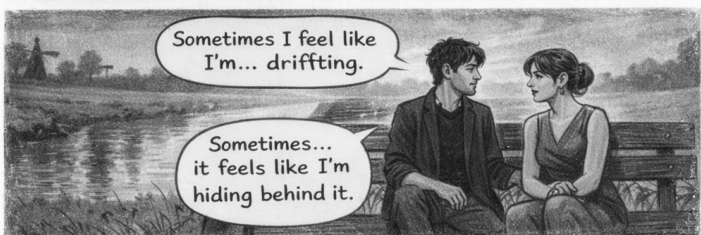
She tilted her head, waiting.

He chickened out. “Never mind. Goodnight.”

She lingered, a faint smile tugging her lips. “Goodnight, Kabir.”

As they turned away, both knew—they were already more entangled than either had planned.

And maybe, just maybe, getting lost wasn’t so bad after all.



Chapter 10

When Cities Speak

The next morning, Kabir woke up before his alarm. That in itself was a miracle. He lay in bed, staring at the ceiling of the hotel room, replaying the bench scene from the night before. Her hand on his. Her eyes meeting his.

That near silence before the tram arrived. He groaned, half smiling, half exasperated at himself.

Why didn't I just say it?

But no. If there was one thing Kabir mastered in life, it was backing out at the last second and covering up with humor.

By the time he shuffled into the breakfast area, hair a mess, shirt half-tucked, Naina was already seated at the corner table with her laptop open, sipping coffee like a seasoned general preparing for battle.

Kabir dropped into the chair opposite her.

"Good morning, Commander."

She didn't look up. "You're late."

"I wasn't aware breakfast had timings in your personal constitution."

“You weren’t aware of a lot of things,” she muttered, though a hint of a smile tugged at her lips.

Kabir watched her for a beat. He caught her stealing a glance at him when she thought he wasn’t looking. And just like that, the awkwardness from the day before melted into something else.

Something lighter, but not less complicated.

“Okay,” Kabir declared, buttering a croissant with exaggerated seriousness, “today, you, me, and Amsterdam are going to bond.”

Naina raised an eyebrow. “Bond?”

“Yes. Like James Bond. Except without the suits. Or the cars. Or the guns. Or... basically everything. But I’ll bring the charm.”

She shook her head. “God save this city.”

They started with the Rijksmuseum. Kabir had never been inside such a vast art gallery before. He stood under Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch* and announced loudly,

“Why does it look like everyone in this painting is posing for their Aadhaar card photo?”

A group of elderly tourists chuckled. Naina hissed, “Kabir! Whisper!”

“Art should be accessible,” he argued, arms folded. “I’m just interpreting.”

Ten minutes later, at the Van Gogh Museum, Naina tried to focus on *The Starry Night*. The swirling blues, the golden

stars—it was breathtaking. But her focus kept slipping because beside her, Kabir was squinting dramatically.

“What now?” she asked, suppressing a laugh.

“I’m just wondering if Van Gogh’s ears got tired of his own paintings.”

She snorted, louder than intended, earning a glare from a serious art student nearby. Kabir grinned triumphantly. “Ladies and gentlemen, mission accomplished. The Ice Queen laughs in public.”

“Stop calling me that.” But the warmth in her eyes betrayed her.

When they reached a smaller room, Kabir unexpectedly quieted down. He stood in front of Van Gogh’s self-portrait, hands in pockets, uncharacteristically still.

“You know,” he said softly, “it feels like he’s staring right at you. Like he knew loneliness way too well.”

Naina turned, surprised. She had expected another joke. Instead, his expression was thoughtful, serious. And for the briefest moment, she saw layers in him that his jokes usually hid.

The Rainstorm

By mid-afternoon, the sky turned moody. Dark clouds gathered as they strolled along the canal streets, stroopwafels in hand.

“Should we head back?”

Naina asked, glancing at the heavy clouds.

Kabir, with misplaced confidence, said, “Nah. These clouds are just bluffing.”

Two minutes later, the heavens opened. Rain came down in sheets, soaking them instantly. Naina shrieked as her carefully ironed shirt clung to her, while Kabir ran in circles, yelling, “We’re in Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham! Cue the violins!”

They dashed into the nearest café—small, cozy, with fogged-up windows and the smell of cinnamon wafting through. Panting and drenched, they collapsed into a corner booth.

The waiter, unfazed by their state, placed steaming mugs of hot chocolate and a slice of apple pie between them.

Naina pushed her wet hair back, laughing breathlessly. “You’re... ridiculous.”

Kabir leaned in, grinning, “And yet, you’re laughing. Again. That’s twice today. A personal record.”

She bit into the pie, shaking her head, but her smile lingered.

For a long moment, they just sat there, watching raindrops race down the glass, the café quiet except for soft jazz music.

Naina sighed. “You know... I don’t remember the last time I laughed this freely. Back home, it’s always deadlines, goals, meetings. Sometimes I forget what it’s like to just... be.”

Kabir’s grin softened. He studied her carefully, his voice lower than usual.

“Maybe that’s what you deserve. To laugh more. To... live more. Not just plan everything.”

Her heart gave a tiny jolt. She looked at him, eyes serious.

“Kabir...”

But before she could finish, the café owner, a plump old Dutch woman, waddled over with a knowing smile. “Such a beautiful couple. You should come back for our Sunday brunch. We give discounts to people in love.”

Naina’s cheeks flamed. “We’re not—” she began, but Kabir cut in smoothly, “We’ll think about it.”

The owner winked and left.

Naina glared. “Why didn’t you correct her?”

Kabir smirked. “Why didn’t you?”

She rolled her eyes, but her pulse was racing.

The Canal Cruise

By evening, the rain had cleared, leaving the city glistening. Kabir suggested the canal cruise—romantic, glittering under the night sky.

They boarded the boat, sitting side by side as Amsterdam lit up around them. Bridges twinkled with fairy lights, their reflections dancing on the water. Soft music played in the background.

Kabir dared to slide his hand closer. Their fingers brushed, lingered. This time, Naina didn’t move away. She let his hand curl gently around hers, and together they watched the city drift by.

For a while, words weren’t needed. The silence spoke for them.

Kabir turned slightly, about to say something—something real. His heart hammered. Tell her. Just tell her.

But just then, fireworks exploded overhead—bright bursts of color lighting up the sky. The entire boat gasped, everyone craning their necks. The moment slipped away into noise and spectacle.

Naina leaned into the railing, eyes wide, and Kabir watched her face glow in the flickering light. He didn't care about the fireworks. She was enough.

Back at the Hotel

It was late when they walked back through the hotel corridor, both quieter than usual.

The air between them was heavier, sweeter.

At her door, Naina paused. She looked at him for a long moment.

“Thank you... for today.”

Kabir swallowed, suddenly nervous. “Anytime.”

Her lips curved into the smallest, most genuine smile. She disappeared into her room, leaving

Kabir staring after her, dazed.

Inside his own room, he shut the door, leaned back against it, and whispered, “She’s it. She’s the one.” Then he actually punched the air like a Bollywood hero, grinning like a fool.

And somewhere across the corridor, Naina sat on her bed, fingers still tingling where his hand had held hers.

She closed her eyes and smiled to herself.

Neither of them knew where this was heading. But for the first time, neither of them was afraid.

Kabir woke up humming.

Not a song, just a random tune that had no melody but somehow carried the memory of Naina's hand in his. He stretched, grinning at the hotel ceiling like a lovesick college kid.

His heart still replayed the image of her face lit by the canal lights, the way her fingers hadn't pulled away from his.

Across the corridor, Naina sat at her desk by the window, laptop open, hair tied back in a hurried bun.

The glow from last night was still there—an unspoken blush when she caught herself staring at nothing, remembering the warmth of Kabir's hand.

But the soft glow was soon drowned out by the shrill buzz of her phone.

"Ma'am, we need the revised deck immediately," her colleague's voice insisted over the call. "The client in Mumbai is furious."

Naina pinched the bridge of her nose, tension creeping back in. The spreadsheets and slides

demanding her attention, pulling her back into the life she knew best—deadlines, deliverables, discipline.

Kabir, meanwhile, wandered into breakfast twenty minutes late, hair tousled, eyes sparkling.

He grabbed a plate of pancakes and plopped down opposite her.

“Morning, sunshine,” he said cheerfully.

Naina barely looked up, typing furiously. “Morning.”

Kabir blinked. No teasing? No smile? He leaned over to peek at her screen. “What’s this? Work? On vacation?”

“It’s not a vacation, Kabir,” she snapped sharper than intended. Then, softening slightly, “It’s work.

We’re here for work.”

Kabir raised his hands in mock surrender. “Okay, boss. Just saying, the tulips outside are prettier than Excel sheets.”

But her shoulders were already stiff.

And just like that, the sweetness of last night lingered only at the edges—threatened by the storm clouds quietly gathering.



Chapter 11

Cracks in the Glass

Kabir woke up humming. Not a song exactly—just some vague, off-key tune that would've made any music director in Mumbai weep. But his heart was buoyant. He stretched wide across the bed, nearly knocking the lamp off the nightstand, grinning at the ceiling like a college boy with his first crush.

Her hand. That was what he kept replaying. Naina's fingers slipping into his last night on the boat, under the glow of fairy-lit bridges and fireworks. It hadn't been a long moment, but it had been enough to set off fireworks inside him that put the real ones to shame.

"Dost," he said to himself, his voice hushed in the empty room, "yeh toh gaya kaam se."

Meanwhile, across the corridor, Naina was not humming.

She sat at the small wooden desk by the window, hair pulled back in a no-nonsense bun, laptop glowing with lines of data and half-formed slides. The morning light streamed over her but couldn't soften the frown on her face.

Last night lingered at the edges of her mind—the warmth of his hand, the sparkle in his eyes—but the harsh buzz of her phone had yanked her out of that reverie before she could indulge.

“Ma’am, we need the revised deck immediately,” came the clipped voice of her Mumbai colleague over WhatsApp call. “The client is furious. They think we missed key points in yesterday’s summary.”

Naina had murmured reassurance, already reaching for her files. That was her: order, responsibility, control. There was no space for butterflies in the stomach when deadlines hovered like vultures.

By the time Kabir stumbled into the breakfast hall twenty minutes late, hair still damp from a hasty shower, shirt half-tucked in his trademark style, Naina had already drained her first cup of coffee and was typing with the speed of a woman defusing a bomb.

He dropped into the chair opposite her with a dramatic sigh, pancakes piled high on his plate. “Morning, sunshine.”

“Morning,” she said curtly, eyes glued to her screen.

Kabir blinked. No teasing, no sarcasm, no little hidden smile? Something was off. He leaned across the table to peek at her laptop.

“What’s this?” he asked, feigning shock. “Work? On vacation? Scandalous.”

Her eyes snapped up, sharp. “It’s not a vacation, Kabir. It’s work. That’s why we’re here.”

Kabir raised his hands in mock surrender. “Okay, boss. Just saying, the tulips outside are prettier than Excel sheets.”

She sighed and went back to typing, shoulders stiff.

The sweetness of last night still lingered somewhere, but like sugar dissolving in bitter coffee, it was fading fast.

By noon, the tension hadn't eased. They were scheduled to attend a networking lunch with delegates, a crucial event. Naina had been meticulous about preparing, reviewing the list of attendees, rehearsing small-talk points in her head.

Kabir? He disappeared.

At first, she assumed he was in his room. Then she thought maybe he'd gone down to the lobby. By the time the clock hit 1 PM, and she was already at the restaurant seated awkwardly between two executives, he still hadn't shown.

Naina forced a professional smile, made polite conversation, and secretly seethed. She excused herself under the pretense of taking a call and dialed his number.

No answer.

Finally, thirty-five minutes later, Kabir strolled in. His hair windblown, holding a paper bag.

"Sorry, sorry," he whispered as he slipped into the seat beside her. "There was this amazing comic book shop I found, and then this street performer—oh my God, Naina, he was juggling fire while singing Kishore Kumar songs. Can you believe—"

She cut him off with a glare sharp enough to silence an auditorium.

After the lunch ended, she pulled him aside into a quiet corner outside.

"Do you have any idea how unprofessional that was?" she hissed.

He blinked, baffled. "Relax. I made it in time for dessert."

"This isn't a joke, Kabir! People notice when you're late. People notice when you don't take things seriously. I cannot afford to look like I'm dragging around... around..." She stopped herself, biting back harsher words.

His jaw tightened. "Dragging around what? A clown? Is that what you think?"

"I think you float through life without caring about consequences," she shot back. "And some of us don't have that luxury."

The words hung between them, heavier than she intended.

Kabir's usual grin faltered. His voice, when it came, was softer but edged. "Maybe you're so busy planning every second that you've forgotten how to live even one."

They stared at each other, the crack widening in the glass of their fragile connection.

The afternoon passed in silence. They walked back to the hotel together, a few feet apart, neither speaking. For the first time since arriving in Amsterdam, the city around them seemed less bright.

In her room, Naina buried herself in emails, trying to drown the echo of his words. Forgotten how to live. It stung because somewhere, a small part of her feared it was true.

Kabir, meanwhile, sat on the hotel balcony, legs stretched, staring at the canals. His paper bag with the comic book lay unopened beside him. For once, jokes didn't come easily. He kept replaying her voice—sharp, disappointed. Dragging around...

Later that evening, he knocked on her door.

She opened cautiously.

“Peace offering,” he said, holding out a bunch of tulips he’d clearly bought in a rush. “Also, I tried learning Dutch to impress you, but I think I told the florist I want to marry his goat. Not sure.”

A reluctant laugh escaped her, though her eyes still carried shadows. She took the flowers,

murmured thanks, and placed them on the desk.

The tension didn’t vanish, but it softened at the edges.

They went for a walk later, through streets glowing with evening lights. Their hands brushed once or twice, but this time, neither reached out fully.

That night, as Naina sat reviewing her slides, her phone buzzed again. It was her boss.

“Naina, we need you in London. Urgent client escalation. You’ll fly tomorrow evening. Bookings are being made.”

Her stomach sank. She hadn’t even told Kabir yet. She looked across the corridor at his door, hesitated.

Kabir, meanwhile, sat on his own balcony, comic book unopened in his lap, staring at the stars. For the first time in a long while, he wondered if maybe... he wasn’t enough. For her. For anyone.

The city outside sparkled, but between them, shadows had begun to form.



Chapter 12

Miles Apart

The breakfast table felt colder than the Amsterdam morning outside. The hotel's dining room buzzed with clinking cutlery, laughter, and the cheerful smell of fresh waffles. But between Kabir and Naina, silence hummed louder than the espresso machine in the corner.

Kabir sat there, chewing his pancake like it had wronged him. Across from him, Naina tapped furiously at her laptop, her coffee untouched. Her brows furrowed, her lips pressed into the kind of line Kabir knew meant "Danger Zone: Do Not Disturb."

He finally broke the silence. "You know, they say pancakes taste better when you eat them with someone who looks up from Excel once in a while."

Naina sighed without looking. "Not today, Kabir."

That made his fork pause. "What's happening?"

She closed her laptop with a snap. For a second, she seemed to hesitate, like the words were too heavy. Then she looked him square in the eye. "I have to leave for London tonight. Emergency client meeting. It's important."

Kabir blinked. He wasn't sure if he'd heard right. "Wait... you're leaving? Tonight?"

“Yes,” she said, her voice clipped. “Just for a few days.”

Something sharp pricked Kabir’s chest. He tried to brush it off with humor, but his grin felt

wobbly. “Wow. One minute we’re sightseeing, next minute you’re abandoning me for fish and chips. I feel used.”

Her eyes softened for a flicker of a second. “Kabir, it’s work. I don’t have a choice.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, waving his fork. “Madam Career calls, Kabir gets benched. Classic.”

Her jaw tightened. She wanted to argue, but she didn’t. She just pushed her chair back and walked away to take another call, leaving Kabir staring at the pancakes that suddenly tasted like cardboard.

By evening, they were at Schiphol Airport. Kabir carried her bag like a sulky bellboy, throwing exaggerated sighs every few steps. Naina ignored him until he said, “So, you’ll ditch me in London, charm some British client with your Excel sorcery, and forget all about poor Amsterdam Kabir, huh?”

She stopped, turned, and placed a hand on his arm. “Kabir... I’ll be back in three days.”

Her voice was calm, reassuring. But all he heard was “back in three days,” like someone had pressed pause on whatever fragile thread had been weaving between them.

At the boarding gate, Kabir stood awkwardly, hands shoved in pockets. “Fine. Go save the corporate world. Don’t forget to eat something besides stress.”

She smiled faintly. “And you... don’t get into trouble.”

“Me? Trouble? I’m a saint,” he said, clutching his chest dramatically.

She rolled her eyes, but there was warmth in it. And then she was gone, swallowed by the stream of passengers.

Kabir stood there long after, staring at the gate like he could will her back. Finally, he muttered to himself, “Saint, my ass,” and wandered off to the bar.

Day one without Naina felt like Kabir had lost his backpack on a school trip. Sure, he could still roam around, eat, laugh—but something essential was missing.

He rented a bicycle, thinking he’d conquer Amsterdam like a local. Ten minutes later, he crashed spectacularly into a café table, sending cappuccinos flying. The furious Dutch man yelled at him in rapid fire, but Kabir just clasped his hands together and said, “Sorry, bhaiya! Peace and love!” before running off.

By evening, he stumbled into a canal-side bar where a bachelor party was in full swing. Within half an hour, he was dancing with a plastic Viking helmet, telling the groom, “Listen, brother, marriage is like... like... biryani. Lots of layers. Sometimes spicy, sometimes bland. But you gotta eat it with raita, you know? Balance.”

The groom nodded solemnly. The rest cheered. Kabir felt like a philosopher king. But when he sat alone later, staring at his beer, the laughter around him sounded hollow. He pulled out his phone and typed, You’d have laughed so hard today, Naina. Then he erased it. Sent a stupid selfie instead.

Her reply was short. Busy. Meeting tomorrow.

Kabir leaned back, phone heavy in his palm. “Busy. Always busy,” he muttered. For once, he had no joke to soften the sting.

Meanwhile in London, Naina was a machine. Meetings, presentations, conference calls. She thrived in that space—the adrenaline of deadlines, the crispness of boardroom suits, the thrill of a client finally nodding in approval.

But when she returned to her hotel room at night, silence wrapped around her too tightly. She’d glance at her phone, scrolling through Kabir’s goofy selfies. One with pancakes on his head. One pretending to drown in a canal. One with a Dutch grandma he’d befriended at a cheese shop.

Her lips twitched despite herself. But then she’d shove the phone away and open her laptop again. Work was safer. Work didn’t confuse her heart.

On the second night, Kabir’s name flashed on her screen. She picked up, weary. “Kabir?”

His voice slurred slightly. “Naina! My favorite PowerPoint presentation!”

She groaned. “Are you drunk?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Depends. If honesty were alcohol, then yes, I’m hammered.”

She rubbed her forehead. “Kabir—”

But he barreled on. “You know what your problem is? You treat life like a deck. Bullet points, structure, graphs! But life’s not a graph, Naina. Life’s... jazz. Messy. Loud. Unpredictable. And you know what? You’re the best damn song in it.”

Her throat tightened unexpectedly. The words were clumsy, raw, but they pierced through her steel armor. For a second, she almost let herself feel it.

But fear won. “Kabir, please grow up,” she snapped, harsher than she intended.

There was silence. Then a quiet chuckle that hurt more than any yell. “Yeah. Grow up. Got it.”

The line went dead.

Naina sat there staring at her phone, heart pounding. She wanted to call back. She didn’t.

Next morning, Kabir woke with a pounding headache, clutching his phone. No message from Naina. He typed one—Sorry, was an idiot last night—but didn’t send it. Pride and regret wrestled inside him.

Across the Channel, Naina breezed into her high-stakes meeting, dazzling the room with precision and poise. Yet even as the client applauded, Kabir’s drunken words echoed in her head: You’re the best damn song in it.

That night, back in her London hotel room, she finally allowed herself to crumble. She picked up her phone, typed: Wish you were here. Her thumb hovered over “send.”

And then she locked the screen.

In Amsterdam, Kabir sat by the canal, phone in his pocket, staring at the water rippling under the moonlight. He wasn’t waiting for a message. But God, he wished one would come.

The distance between them wasn’t just miles now. It was silence. It was unspoken words. It was fear on both sides—fear

of admitting too much, too soon, and losing what they hadn't even fully found yet.

For the first time since this mad journey began, Kabir and Naina weren't laughing, weren't bickering, weren't teasing.

They were just two people, in two different cities, both aching but too stubborn to say it.

And somewhere, in that space between Amsterdam canals and London skyscrapers, something

fragile was beginning to crack.



Chapter 13

Back to Where It Hurts

The familiar chaos of Delhi Airport hit Kabir like a dhol beat to the chest. The moment he stepped out of arrivals, dragging his suitcase with one wheel stubbornly refusing to roll straight, the air felt thicker, noisier, heavier with masala and monsoon humidity. Announcers droned overhead, kids wailed, relatives waved banners with names written in marker pens. After the crisp chill of Amsterdam, this was like being thrown into a wedding baraat without warning.

But in some strange way, it felt like home.

“Arre Kabir!” His friend Arjun’s booming voice cut through the noise. Kabir barely had time to brace before Arjun barreled into him with a hug that nearly knocked the suitcase out of his hand.

“Bhai! Amsterdam se kya laaya? Sirf tulip ya koi firangi bhi?” Arjun’s grin was wicked.

Kabir smirked, masking the fatigue in his bones. “Bhai, tulip toh laaya hoon. Firangi meri aankhon ke saamne se bhaag gayi.”

Arjun roared with laughter, slapping Kabir’s back so hard he choked. Within minutes, Kabir was surrounded by his circle of friends, pulling his cheeks, asking about “Dutch

girlfriends,” and trying to snatch his bag to see if he’d smuggled back duty-free whiskey.

It was loud, messy, affectionate—and it only reminded Kabir of something missing. A silence, a pair of sharp eyes that would have cut through this chaos.

Naina’s return had been quieter. No baraat-style welcome at the airport, no friends waving placards. Her cab had pulled into her family’s apartment complex, where her mother was waiting at the door with aarti thali and tears in her eyes.

“My bitiya, my achiever,” her mother whispered, pulling her into a crushing hug. Naina let herself sink into it, inhaling the smell of cardamom and home-cooked dal. For a moment, the weight of London slipped away.

But when her phone buzzed with another work email, she disentangled herself quickly. “Maa, I’ll unpack later. Just... let me handle this.”

Her mother sighed, muttering to herself. “Pata nahi, kab yeh ladki ka dil khulega. Sirf laptop hi pati ban gaya iska.”

Naina didn’t hear. She was already in her room, laptop booting up. But somewhere, deep down, she was thinking of Kabir—wondering if he had landed yet, if he’d thought about her on the flight, if he’d... missed her.

It was inevitable that their paths would cross soon. Both Kabir’s and Naina’s families moved in overlapping social circles, the kind where everyone knew everyone’s business before the person themselves did. The first opportunity arrived in the form of a puja at a mutual friend’s home—an elaborate affair with flower garlands, pandit chants, and

children running wild with sparklers even though it wasn't Diwali.

Kabir arrived late, as usual, half his shirt untucked, hair refusing to behave. "Arre Panditji, forgive me. Traffic and my alarm clock both conspired against me," he joked, earning indulgent chuckles from the elders.

And then he saw her. Naina stood by the rangoli, wearing a simple sky-blue salwar suit that made her look like a painting. She was laughing softly at something one of the kids said, her usually composed face relaxed in a way Kabir hadn't seen since Amsterdam.

For a second, Kabir forgot how to breathe.

He swaggered over, rehearsing a casual line in his head. But when she turned and their eyes met, all he managed was a weak, "Hi."

Her smile was polite, nothing more. "Hi."

The awkwardness between them was louder than the pandit's mantras. Kabir scratched his neck, searching for a quip, while Naina smoothed her dupatta, suddenly finding the floor fascinating. Their friends, sensing the tension, smirked at each other knowingly.

And that was the exact moment Riya walked in.

She breezed into the courtyard like a gust of spring. Dressed in a vibrant yellow kurti, bangles jingling, Riya was the kind of person who filled a room with laughter before she even spoke.

“Guess who!” she squealed, covering Kabir’s eyes from behind.

Kabir blinked, confused, then broke into a grin. “No way. Riya?”

She spun him around and hugged him tight. “Yes way! God, you look the same. Still messy, still late, still impossible.”

Kabir laughed, pulling back to look at her. “And you! Still loud, still bossy, still... glowing.”

Riya mock-punched his arm, then turned to the others. “Hi, I’m Riya. Childhood friend, partner-in-crime, basically the one who knows all Kabir’s embarrassing secrets.”

The aunties in the room exchanged delighted looks. Childhood friend.

Their mental matchmaking engines whirled instantly.

Kabir, oblivious, was too busy catching up. “When did you get back from Pune? Last I heard you were studying design there.”

“Last month! And now I’m freelancing from here. Perfect timing, right?” she said brightly.

Perfect timing indeed.

From her corner, Naina watched the scene unfold with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. She’d never seen Kabir this animated in Delhi. He laughed easily, his arm brushing against Riya’s as they swapped inside jokes no one else understood.

Her chest tightened. It was ridiculous, she told herself. Riya was just a friend. Childhood nostalgia. Nothing more.

But when an aunty leaned over and whispered, “Dekho, Kabir aur Riya kitne acche lagte hain saath,” Naina’s jaw clenched.

She excused herself, slipping out onto the balcony where the puja smoke mixed with the cool evening breeze. Alone, she tried to steady her breathing. Why should it matter? He’s Kabir. Carefree, careless Kabir. Not my Kabir.

But the lump in her throat refused to budge.

The evening rolled on in a blur of mantras, laughter, and laddoos. Riya stuck to Kabir like they’d never spent years apart. She teased him about his Amsterdam misadventures (stories he exaggerated wildly), and he teased her about her disastrous attempts at cooking in school.

“Remember the Maggi experiment?” Kabir snorted. “Kitchen smelled like burnt plastic for days.”

“Shut up!” Riya laughed, swatting him. “At least I tried. You still can’t make chai without burning it.”

Everyone laughed. Kabir grinned. Naina forced a chuckle, but her insides twisted.

Later, when she finally crossed paths with Kabir in the hallway, she nodded stiffly. “Looks like you and Riya picked up where you left off.”

Kabir raised an eyebrow, searching her tone. “Jealous, are we?”

Her spine stiffened. “Why would I be?”

He smirked, but it faltered when he saw the flash of hurt in her eyes. He wanted to say something—something real, something honest—but Riya called his name from the courtyard, and the moment shattered.

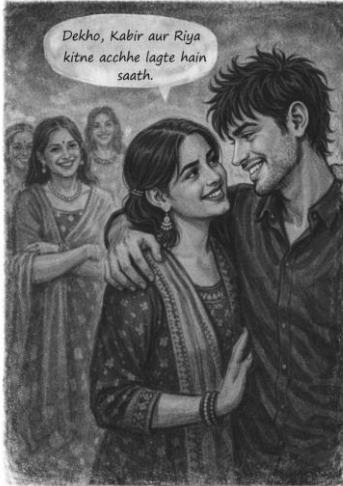
That night, Kabir sat on his terrace with Riya, sipping chai and laughing about old times. It felt easy, effortless. But even as he laughed, his mind kept drifting to a pair of sky-blue eyes that had looked away too quickly.

Across the city, Naina sat by her window, staring at her phone. Kabir's name glowed on the screen. She typed, Hope you're home safe. Then erased it.

Instead, she shut her phone and hugged her knees, fighting the ache that refused to leave.

For the first time, the distance wasn't across oceans. It was right here, in their own city, with

Riya's laughter echoing in the middle. And for both Kabir and Naina, it hurt more than any miles ever had.



Chapter 14

The Sangeet Storm

The Deshpande household in Mumbai was lit up like a thousand diyas had decided to dance together. Fairy lights clung to the walls, fresh marigolds hung in garlands, and the smell of biryani, ghee-laden laddoos, and incense wafted through the air. It was the eve of Kabir's cousin's wedding sangeet, and chaos was the chief guest.

Kabir had returned to India only two weeks ago, and he had barely adjusted back to the noise when his entire family threw him headfirst into the celebration. "Abhi tu aaya hi hai aur shaadi bhi aa gayi!" his mother had declared. He had groaned but secretly relished it—Indian weddings were his playground. Free food, cousins to joke around with, and no shortage of pretty girls to pull into a dance.

But this time, things weren't the same.

Because she was back too. Naina.

And because Riya had arrived, glowing like a heroine in her lehenga, all charm and laughter, already winning over every aunt, uncle, and child with her bubbly energy.

Kabir stood by the drinks counter, wearing a deep-blue kurta his mother had practically blackmailed him into.

He was sipping his cola when Riya walked in, silver-grey lehenga shimmering under the fairy lights. “Arre wah, Kabir!” she grinned. “Tumhari kurta finally ironed hai? Kisne miracle kiya? Definitely not you.”

Kabir raised a brow. “Nice of you to notice. And excuse me, I ironed it myself.”

“Ha! If you ironed it, then I’m the Queen of England,” she teased, snatching his glass of cola and sipping from it like they’d done this their whole lives.

The gaggle of aunties nearby chuckled. “Dekho dekho, bilkul pati-patni jaisi nok-jhok karte hain.”

Kabir almost choked on his drink. “Aunty!”

Riya laughed, but instead of brushing it off, she winked at the aunties. “Kabir aur main? Dangerous combo, aunty. Pure family ko pagal kar denge.”

The aunties giggled harder, whispering to each other as they walked away. Kabir ran a hand through his hair. “Dekha? Ab toh bas dhol bajega. Kal tak shaadi ki date nikal aayegi.”

“Don’t worry,” Riya smirked. “Main tumhe ‘haan’ bolne ka plan nahi bana rahi... abhi tak.”

Kabir laughed, shaking his head, but a corner of his heart felt uneasy. Because for the first time in years, people weren’t joking about him and some random girl. They were saying it about him and Riya—and it almost made sense. She fit right in.

But Kabir’s laugh didn’t quite reach his eyes.

The music swelled—Bollywood tracks remixed into thumping beats. And then, like time decided to slow just for him, Naina entered.

She wore a deep maroon saree with golden borders, hair swept elegantly to one side, her diamond earrings glinting under the lights. She carried herself like someone who didn't need attention but got it anyway.

Kabir froze.

It had been weeks since Amsterdam, weeks since that tension-filled goodbye. And yet, one look at her and the memories came crashing back—the canals, the laughter, the silences too heavy for either of them to break.

Naina spotted him, her gaze lingering for a second before flicking away. Her face betrayed nothing, but Kabir knew her well enough to spot the storm behind her eyes.

“Arre Naina beta!” one of the uncles beamed, pulling her into the group. “So proud of you. Heard about your big international client deal. Wah wah!”

Kabir's chest tightened. Of course. She was flying high, achieving everything she had dreamed of. Meanwhile, he was still fumbling through job interviews and chasing vague ambitions.

Naina smiled politely. “Thank you, uncle. It was a team effort.”

But when her eyes darted across the room and found Kabir laughing with Riya, her smile faltered—just for a second.

As with every sangeet, someone had to pull reluctant guests into dancing. Soon, Kabir found himself shoved onto the stage with cousins cheering, dholaks pounding, and the DJ blasting “Badtameez Dil.”

He went wild, of course—his carefree energy lighting up the floor, goofy moves making everyone roar with laughter. And then Riya jumped in, perfectly matching his madness.

Together they twirled, laughed, and pulled each other into ridiculous Bollywood steps.

“Bas bas, dulha ko bhool jao!” someone shouted. “Aaj toh Kabir aur Riya ka show hai!”

Everyone clapped and whistled.

Kabir, panting, turned and—froze.

Naina was watching from the sidelines. Her face was carefully composed, clapping along, but her eyes... her eyes gave her away.

Kabir felt a sting in his chest. He wanted to pull her into the dance floor, to laugh with her the way they once had. But something stopped him—pride, hurt, the weight of their silence.

So instead, he twirled Riya dramatically, earning a roar of approval.

Naina turned away.

Later that night, after the performances wound down, Naina slipped out to the terrace for fresh air. The night sky hung heavy with stars, and the muffled sounds of music floated up. She pulled her phone out and opened her work email.

“Congratulations on the successful pitch,” her boss had written. “You’ve been recommended for a leadership training in Singapore next quarter.”

Her heart should have leapt. This was everything she’d worked for. And yet, she felt... hollow. She wanted to share this news with someone who’d understand. Someone who’d cheer in that maddeningly carefree way. Someone who’d tell her to celebrate, not just move on to the next milestone.

She thought of Kabir. And instantly hated herself for it.

Back inside, Kabir was being cornered by his mother and two aunties.

“Beta, Riya is such a nice girl. Tum dono ekdum perfect ho. She balances you out. Tumhare jaise ladkon ko Riya jaise ladkiyan hi sambhal sakti hain.”

Kabir tried to laugh it off. “Aunty, please. Aap log shaadi.com ki walking-talking versions ho.”

But as Riya joined the group, smiling and radiant, Kabir felt the walls closing in.

Their paths finally crossed near the buffet. Kabir was filling his plate with biryani when Naina stepped beside him for salad.

“Hi,” Kabir said, voice awkward.

“Hi,” Naina replied, equally stiff.

The silence stretched, filled only by clattering plates.

“You... look nice,” Kabir blurted.

Naina's lips curved slightly. "Thanks. You too. Kurta suits you."

They stood there, inches apart, yet miles away. The air between them hummed with everything unsaid—Amsterdam nights, fights, almost-confessions.

Before Kabir could say more, Riya bounded up. "Kabir! Come, we're doing a family selfie!" She looped her arm through his, tugging him away.

Naina's smile faltered again. She turned back to her salad, stabbing a cucumber with unnecessary force.

The night wore on with laughter, dancing, and playful banter. To everyone else, it was a perfect evening of celebration.

But inside, Kabir felt torn. Riya was fun, easy, familiar. Yet every laugh with her felt incomplete, every glance sideways was searching for someone else.

And Naina—every success of hers shone brighter than the lights around, but her victories rang hollow in her own ears. Her loneliness gnawed at her, amplified every time she saw Kabir smiling at someone who wasn't her.

As the party wrapped up, fireworks lit the sky above. Children screamed in delight, families cheered, and music played on.

Kabir stood with Riya and his cousins, laughing, but his eyes strayed across the courtyard where Naina stood alone, phone in hand, face half-lit by the glow of the screen.

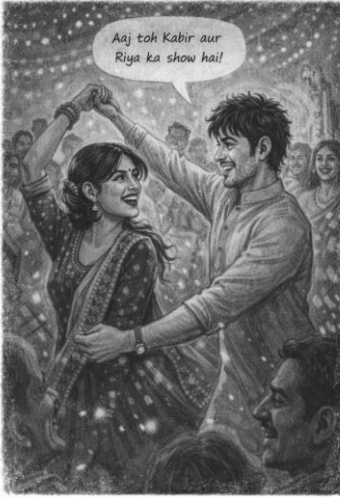
She looked up just once, catching his gaze across the crowd.

And in that fleeting moment—amidst all the chaos, colors, and laughter—the truth settled heavily in both their hearts.

They weren't okay.

Not yet.

And no amount of noise around them could drown out the silence between them.



Chapter 15

Simmering Sparks

The wedding season hadn't ended yet. In India, it never really did. After Kabir's cousin's sangeet came the mehendi, then the haldi, then the shaadi itself—each ceremony a festival in its own right. For Kabir, it was a license to laugh, to eat until his kurta buttons groaned, and to let himself be dragged into more dances than his legs could manage.

And yet, through all the colors and noise, there was always a pair of eyes he couldn't ignore.

Naina.

She was everywhere and nowhere at once. She moved gracefully through the functions, helping relatives with flowers, laughing with bridesmaids, occasionally checking her phone with the seriousness of someone who had a world waiting outside all this chaos. She avoided Kabir with a precision that felt almost rehearsed.

And Kabir—who could charm any room—found himself tongue-tied every time she came within a few feet.

The mehendi was in full swing, the bride's hands painted with intricate designs, the courtyard ringing with dhol beats. The women sang folk songs, teasing the groom's side, while the younger

cousins ran around with cones of mehendi and bowls of haldi, smearing whoever they could catch.

Kabir, cornered into applying a tiny dot of mehendi on his hand “for shagun,” was sulking in exaggerated despair when Riya plopped down next to him.

“Stop acting like you’re being tortured,” she laughed, blowing on her own mehendi design. “It’s just a dot.”

“Dot se shuru hota hai, Riya ji. Kal tak shaadi ka mandap ban jaata hai,” Kabir quipped, earning a roar of laughter from nearby cousins.

Just then, the music shifted to a peppy Bollywood track—“London Thumakda.” The floor filled with dancing cousins, and before Kabir could escape, someone shoved him toward the center.

“Arre, Kabir! Dance karo!”

He tried to protest, but then Riya was pulling him by the wrist, twirling him into the rhythm. His goofy steps drew cheers, her graceful spins earned claps, and together they became the accidental stars of the floor again.

And then Kabir saw her.

Naina, standing at the edge, smiling politely as she clapped for the dancers.

For a second, Kabir’s heart tripped. He wanted to walk up, pull her in, laugh with her like they used to. His legs even moved toward her—until Riya tugged him back with a playful, “Arre partner, don’t leave me hanging!”

Kabir forced a grin and twirled Riya again, but his eyes kept darting to Naina.

Naina clapped, her expression smooth.

But her nails dug slightly into her palm. Almost.

Later that night, the buffet line was a battlefield of plates, curries, and hungry relatives. Kabir balanced a plate overloaded with butter naan and paneer when he spotted Naina reaching for the salad spoon at the same time.

Their hands brushed.

Kabir froze. She pulled back instantly.

“Sorry,” Naina said curtly.

“It’s okay,” Kabir replied, a little too quickly.

They stood in silence, spooning food onto their plates like strangers. Finally, Kabir blurted, “So... big boss-lady now, huh? Singapore training and all?”

Naina’s head whipped around. “How did you—”

“Uncles gossip more than aunties,” Kabir smirked, then softened. “Congratulations, though. I mean it.”

“Thanks,” she said, her tone clipped. But her eyes betrayed the flicker of pride... and something else. Loneliness.

Before Kabir could say anything more, Riya appeared, sliding between them with her plate. “Arre, Kabir! Come, taste this chicken kebab. It’s amazing.”

Kabir hesitated, glancing at Naina. She was already turning away.

Almost. The next afternoon, Kabir's gang of old college friends crashed the wedding house, turning the living room into a comedy club.

"Arre Kabir, suna hai Amsterdam mein tumhari kahani chal rahi thi?" one friend teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

Kabir choked on his chai. "What kahani?"

Another friend leaned in dramatically. "Ek ladki. Naam... Naina?"

The room erupted in laughter. Kabir's ears turned red. "Shut up, you idiots."

Just then, Naina entered, carrying a tray of sweets for the elders. She caught the tail end of the laughter, the way Kabir avoided her eyes, and the sharp whisper of her own name.

Her jaw tightened. "Sweets, anyone?" she said crisply, placing the tray down without looking at him.

Kabir glared at his friends once she left. "Tame your mouths, yaar."

But the damage was done.

Almost.

Two days later, as the wedding preparations peaked, Kabir was sent to pick up extra flowers from the market. His scooter spluttered to life, and he cursed Mumbai traffic as usual.

Halfway down the lane, he spotted Naina standing under a shop's awning, holding a bag of bangles. The skies had opened up, sheets of rain drenching the road.

"Need a ride?" Kabir called out before he could stop himself.

Naina hesitated. For a moment, he saw her weighing the pros and cons—the storm outside vs. the storm between them. Finally, she stepped forward.

“Thanks.”

She climbed on, careful not to touch him, her saree pleats gathered delicately. Kabir felt every inch of the space between them, every raindrop that hit his arm where hers might have brushed.

They rode in silence through the drenched lanes, the smell of wet earth filling the air. Once, the scooter jerked over a pothole, and she instinctively grabbed his shoulder. His heart somersaulted.

She let go quickly. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he muttered, throat dry.

They pulled up at the wedding house, both dripping wet. For a moment, standing there with the rain cascading around them, Kabir almost said it—everything he’d been choking back.

Almost.

Riya came running with umbrellas, laughing. “Arre, tum dono toh puri tarah bheeg gaye!”

And the moment was gone.

That night, after the guests left, Naina sat at her desk with her laptop open. The Singapore training letter blinked back at her, the cursor hovering over “Accept.”

She should be overjoyed. But as the laughter of families echoed faintly outside her window, she felt something hollow expand inside her.

She typed out a message: Kabir, can we talk?

Her finger hovered over “Send.”

Then she deleted it.

Almost.

Meanwhile, Kabir was on the terrace with Riya and his cousins, joking about who would catch the next bouquet at the wedding. Riya teased, “Obviously me and Kabir. Perfect team, no?”

Everyone cheered. Kabir forced a grin. But as fireworks burst across the sky, his eyes wandered instinctively to the far corner balcony, where Naina stood alone, gazing up at the same fireworks.

For a second, he thought she looked back. Their eyes met across the lights.

Kabir’s heart screamed at him to go, to run to her.

But he stayed rooted in place, Riya’s laughter filling his ears.

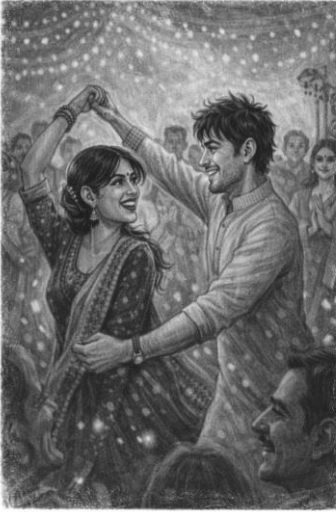
Almost.

The wedding drums rolled on, songs soared into the night, and everyone danced like tomorrow didn’t exist.

But for Kabir and Naina, tomorrow loomed heavy—full of words unsaid, confessions buried, and glances that burned more than they soothed.

Every moment was pulling them closer, every interruption pushing them apart.

And somewhere between the chaos and silence, the almosts were becoming unbearable.



Chapter 16

The Return

The Sharma household was in overdrive.

Strings of marigold flowers dangled from balconies, fairy lights blinked like restless stars, and the smell of cardamom tea and fresh samosas wafted through the crowded lanes outside. Kabir's cousin Aarav was getting engaged, and like all good Indian families, this wasn't just a ceremony—it was a full-blown festival.

Inside, chaos reigned supreme. Aunties in silk sarees barked orders about rangoli placement, cousins argued over the playlist, and the men in the family... well, they mostly pretended to be busy while sneaking pakoras off the kitchen counter.

Kabir, true to form, had managed to get assigned to “technical duty”—that is, setting up the sound system. Which of course meant nothing was working.

“Bhai, mic test, mic test!” yelled one cousin.

Kabir tapped the mic, which produced a screech so loud it nearly shattered eardrums.

“Arre, yeh kya kar raha hai tu?” his uncle shouted from across the hall.

“Relax, Mama, this is just... warm-up,” Kabir grinned

sheepishly, twisting a random knob and making the speakers blare out a Bhojpuri remix of “Kajra Re.”

The entire family turned and glared. His little cousin smirked, “Kabir bhaiya, bas aap DJ ban jao. Shaadi cancel ho jayegi.” “Ha-ha, very funny,” Kabir muttered, though he couldn’t help laughing at himself.

And through this madness, Naina moved like calm amidst chaos.

She had arrived early to help Aarav’s fiancée with her lehenga fitting, and somehow—because she was Naina—she had ended up organizing the rangoli, calming the panicking bride-to-be, instructing waiters, and soothing Kabir’s mother all at once.

“Beta, tum toh Lakshmi ho,” Kabir’s mother told her warmly, pressing her cheek. “Yeh ladka toh bas—” she waved her hand at Kabir, who was still tangled in wires. “Par tumhari wajah se sab sambhal raha hai.”

Naina smiled, her dimples softening the exhaustion. “Bas aunty, thoda discipline hona chahiye. Waise Kabir bhi kar lega. Thoda waqt do.”

Kabir overheard. “Aha! Thank you, Miss Naina Management Consultant. Next time I’ll hire you for sound checks.”

“Don’t worry,” she shot back with a laugh. “At least then they’ll work.”

Their banter sparked, light and playful, like invisible threads weaving tighter around them.

In between chores and ceremonies, Kabir and Naina kept bumping into each other—literally. At one point, Kabir nearly dropped a tray of laddoos on her.

“Careful!” she scolded, grabbing his arm before the sweets tumbled.

“Arre, yeh laddoo toh bas tumhare liye bacha raha tha,” he winked.

“Of course. Sweet disaster, that’s what you are.”

He chuckled, but something in his eyes lingered—something softer, unsaid.

Later, when fairy lights needed fixing, Kabir climbed a stool, balancing precariously. “Hold this!” he called, tossing her the end of the wire. She held it steady, glancing up. For a moment, Kabir’s face was outlined against the lights, boyish and careless, but warm.

He looked down, met her gaze, and the crowd disappeared. Just him, her, and the buzzing glow of fairy bulbs.

Kabir opened his mouth. “Naina, I...”

“Arre Kabir!” his aunt yelled from across the room. “Bas light se khelna band kar, come dance practice!”

The moment shattered. Kabir climbed down, scratching his head, while Naina smiled faintly, as if half-expecting the interruption.

Evening fell. The engagement was in full swing—music, laughter, relatives gossiping in corners. Kabir was dragged into a cousin’s dance rehearsal, his half-hearted thumkas earning whistles from the kids.

And then—like a film scene—everything stopped.

The front doors opened. A soft breeze slipped in. Heads turned. Conversations paused.

Ritika walked in.

She was radiant in a deep crimson lehenga, sequins catching the fairy lights. Her hair cascaded in waves, her smile poised but magnetic. She carried herself like she knew she was the showstopper—and in that moment, she was.

Kabir froze. His throat went dry. Memories slammed into him—late-night coffee dates, office corridors echoing with their laughter, stolen glances across meeting rooms. Ritika hadn't just been someone. She had been the someone.

"Ritika!" his aunt shrieked joyfully, rushing to embrace her. "Beta! You came! Oh, Kabir, dekho kaun aaya hai!"

Kabir's cousins cheered. One nudged him, whispering, "Bhaiya, purani prem kahani back in HD quality."

Naina, standing near the sweet counter, turned her head. Her eyes found Kabir's face—stunned, conflicted—and then Ritika's, glowing, confident. The smile on her lips faltered just a fraction.

"Aree wah!" Uncle boomed, clapping Kabir's back. "Dekha sab logon ne? Perfect match aa gayi! Kabir aur Ritika—made in heaven!"

The hall erupted in laughter and teasing. Ritika blushed gracefully, but her eyes never left Kabir's.

Kabir fumbled. "Uh—arre Mama, bas... woh... I mean—"

“Arre chup!” another cousin laughed. “Shaadi ke ghanti baj rahi hai already!”

Naina forced a polite laugh, turning back to the mithai table. She stacked gulab jamuns carefully, her hands steady, though her heart suddenly wasn't.

Later, Kabir found himself cornered with Ritika near the stage. She teased him effortlessly.

“Still the same,” she said softly. “Messing up sound systems, tripping over wires.

You haven't changed at all.” Kabir rubbed the back of his neck. “You remember all that?”

“How could I forget?” Her voice dropped, laced with history. “We practically lived in that office... you, me, endless coffee cups.”

He laughed awkwardly. “Ya, well... those were different times.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Times can come back.”

Across the room, Naina caught fragments of their laughter, the way Ritika's hand brushed Kabir's arm casually, as if she had every right. Something twisted in her chest.

Later, hiding behind trays of appetizers, Naina's friend Meera whispered, “Oho, who's Miss Bombshell?”

Naina shrugged too quickly. “Just... someone from Kabir's past, I guess.”

“Past looking like present, haan?” Meera teased. “You okay?”

“Of course,” Naina smiled, tight. “Why wouldn't I be?”

But when Meera looked away, Naina exhaled slowly, fighting the pinch behind her eyes.

After the sangeet, Ritika pulled Kabir aside, near the balcony strung with lights. Her voice dropped, rich with mischief and intent.

“You really thought you could run away from me, Kabir?” she murmured, eyes locking his.

Kabir blinked. “Ritika, it’s not like that...”

“Then what is it like?” she smiled, too knowing. “Because from where I stand, nothing has changed.”

Naina, passing by with a tray, caught just that line. She froze. Her heart dipped. She walked

away quickly, her steps heavier than before.

As Aarav and his fiancée exchanged rings, the family insisted everyone join the dance floor. Someone shoved Kabir forward. Someone else pulled Ritika beside him. The crowd cheered: “Our next couple!”

Ritika laughed, twirling gracefully. Kabir tried to step away, but the cousins pushed them together. From across the hall, Naina clapped politely, her smile brittle, her eyes clouded.

In the music and cheers, Kabir’s gaze searched desperately—for her. For Naina.

But she had already slipped away toward the balcony, hiding her ache under the glittering night sky.

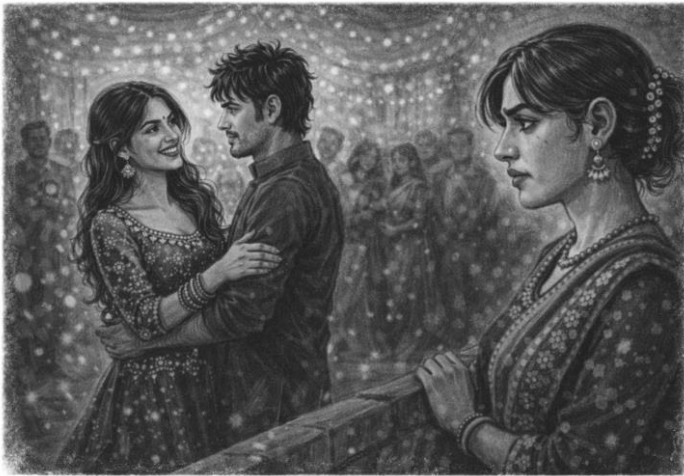
By the time the engagement wound down, laughter still echoing, Kabir was restless. Everyone was thrilled with Ritika’s

re-entry, but Kabir's mind kept wandering to where Naina had gone.

Ritika glowed in the family's embrace. Naina vanished in the shadows.

And Kabir?

Caught between yesterday and today, with no easy escape.



Chapter 17

Ghosts That Don't Stay Buried

The Sharma household woke up the next morning still buzzing from the engagement party. The fairy lights still twinkled faintly, the marigold petals lay scattered like forgotten confetti, and the faint echo of last night's dhol beats lingered in the air.

But in Kabir's head, there was no music. Only noise.

He lay sprawled on his bed, staring at the ceiling fan as it whirled lazily. Sleep had been impossible. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw two faces. Naina's — quiet, restrained, but with that flicker of pain she couldn't hide. And Ritika's — glowing, confident, walking in like she owned the room, like no years had passed at all.

He groaned, pulling a pillow over his face. Why now? Why her? Why when Naina...

By the time he dragged himself downstairs, the house was alive again. Aunts were gossiping over chai, kids were already raiding the leftover sweets, and uncles sat with newspapers they weren't really reading.

But the main subject was unanimous. "Dekha kal Ritika ko? Kya entry thi!" one aunt gushed, dipping her biscuit.

“Haan haan, bilkul heroine lag rahi thi,” another agreed. “Aur Kabir ke saath toh wah! Perfect jodi.”

“Bas, inki shaadi ki date bhi fix kar do,” someone joked.

The table erupted in laughter.

Kabir nearly dropped his cup of chai. “Arre! What is this nonsense? Shaadi-shaadi kyun chalu ho gaya subah-subah?”

His cousin Aarav, now basking in his own engagement glow, smirked. “Bhai, yesterday half the family made a WhatsApp group. Guess what it’s called? #KabirWedsRitika.”

The kids squealed with laughter.

Kabir’s ears went red. “Delete it! Right now!”

“Nahi hota bhai, admin toh Ritika di hain,” the cousin shot back, wickedly.

Kabir nearly choked. “WHAT?”

Across the room, Naina quietly sipped her tea, her face calm, though her grip on the cup was tight. She didn’t join the teasing. She didn’t look at Kabir. She didn’t have to — the silence between them said enough.

Later, when the house thinned out, Kabir finally caught Naina in the corridor. She was carrying a tray of washed cups back to the kitchen.

“Naina,” he called softly.

She paused, turned. Her expression was polite, detached. “Yes?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “About yesterday... you saw Ritika and me and... I mean, it wasn’t—”

“You don’t need to explain anything to me,” she cut in smoothly. “It’s your life, Kabir. Your family is clearly very fond of her.”

“Naina, it’s not what it looked like.”

Her eyes flickered, a trace of hurt slipping through. “People don’t cheer that loudly if there isn’t some truth.”

Before Kabir could answer, an aunty barged in between them, holding up a spice box. “Naina beta! Do you know where the chai masala is? Kabir, don’t just stand there, help!”

The moment shattered, again. Naina walked off, tray balanced carefully, leaving Kabir standing in the middle of the hallway, furious at the universe’s impeccable timing.

Upstairs, Ritika sat at the dressing table in the guest room. She absentmindedly twirled the silver bangles on her wrist, eyes glazed.

Last night had felt like a dream — stepping back into this house, the warmth of Kabir’s family, the teasing, the laughter. For a moment, it was as if the years hadn’t happened, as if nothing had gone wrong.

But they had. She closed her eyes, the flashback sharp.

Kabir in their old office, leaning against her desk, boyish grin lighting up his face. “Ritika, we’re great together. Why don’t we take this seriously? Move in, maybe even... you know... think

long term.”

Her own younger voice, brisk, cutting: “Kabir, I can’t. I just got promoted. I’m heading to Singapore next month. Marriage? Settling? It’s not in my plan.”

He had tried, once more. “But plans can adjust. People matter more.”

Her silence had been the answer.

And then — nothing. She had ghosted him. No calls. No closure. Just... gone.

Ritika’s throat tightened. She whispered now into the empty room: “Biggest mistake of my life.”

She pressed her hands to her face, fighting the ache in her chest. Back then, she had thought ambition would fill her heart. That if she kept running forward, she wouldn’t look back.

But the truth was brutal. She had built success, yes. She had travelled, climbed ladders. But her nights had been hollow. And every time she saw a carefree laugh, a careless boy smiling in a crowded street — her mind betrayed her with his image. Kabir. Always Kabir.

She opened her eyes, determination hardening. “Not this time. I let him go once. Never again. This time, Kabir will be mine.”

By afternoon, the meddling rose to another level.

“Beta Kabir,” his mother called sweetly, “make Ritika her tea. The adrak wali, remember? She loves it the way you make it.”

Kabir froze. “Ma!”

Ritika, seated nearby, smirked. "Still remember my order, Aunty? He used to make me tea in office breaks too."

The room tittered. Kabir wanted to vanish into the floor. Across the room, Naina looked up from a pile of mehndi cones she was sorting. Her smile was polite. Too polite.

Later, a group of cousins cornered Kabir. "Bhai, we're starting dance practice again for sangeet. You and Ritika will do the couple performance, okay?"

"What?!" Kabir yelled.

"Of course," one girl giggled. "Naina di can choreograph. She's good at organizing, right?"

Kabir's heart sank. He glanced at Naina, who was already turning away, her face unreadable.

That evening, Ritika found Kabir sitting in the garden, fiddling with his phone. She slid onto the bench beside him, her perfume familiar, her presence confident.

"You still avoid responsibilities the same way," she teased.

Kabir glanced at her. "And you still barge into people's personal space."

"Some things never change," she smiled.

They sat in silence for a moment. Ritika tilted her head. "Do you remember Goa?"

Kabir blinked. "Goa?"

"Our conference trip. You snuck us out of that boring session, dragged me to the beach. You said work could wait, but sunsets couldn't."

Kabir chuckled reluctantly. "Ya... I said that."

Her eyes softened. "We were perfect then, Kabir. We just... drifted."

Kabir's throat tightened. He didn't answer.

From the balcony above, Naina stood in the shadows, watching. She saw Ritika's hand brush Kabir's arm lightly, as if claiming familiarity.

She saw Kabir's half-smile, the nostalgia tugging at him. And she turned away quickly, her chest aching.

That night, Naina sat on the bed in the guest room, her hair open, laptop in front of her but forgotten. Meera plopped down beside her.

"So," Meera began dramatically, "are we talking about the elephant in the room?"

"What elephant?" Naina asked coolly, not looking up.

"The one in a red lehenga who clearly knows Kabir too well."

Naina smiled faintly. "It's none of my business."

"Really?" Meera nudged. "You don't care at all?"

Naina's voice cracked slightly. "Why should I? Kabir's past is his past. And maybe... his future too."

Meera softened. "Naina..." But Naina shook her head quickly, blinking fast. "I should focus on my own career. That's all that matters."

Still, when Meera left, Naina sat in the dark, staring at the city lights. Her heart betrayed her, whispering truths her mind refused to say aloud.

Meanwhile, Kabir tossed in his bed, restless.

Flashbacks rolled in – Ritika laughing with him in that old café, Ritika holding his hand under the conference table. Then, Naina's dimpled smile, her sharp wit, the way she steadied him during chaos.

He muttered into the pillow. “Yaar... sab kuch ek saath kyun ho raha hai? Main kya karoon?”

In her room, Ritika stared at herself in the mirror, determination blazing. She whispered:

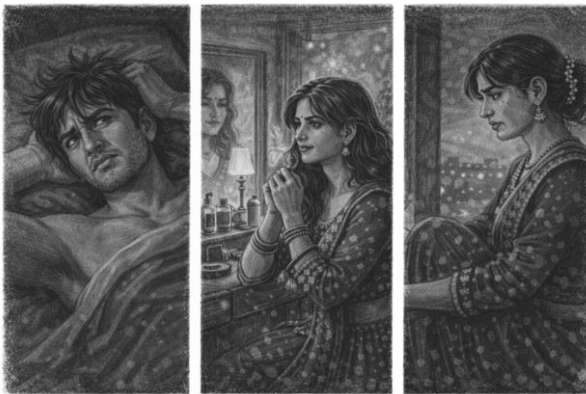
“Tomorrow, I start again. This time, Kabir will not slip away. He will be mine.”

In another room, Naina leaned against the window, moonlight brushing her face, whispering:

“I shouldn't care... but why does it hurt this much?”

And Kabir, sandwiched between yesterday and today, tossed again, eyes open in the dark, clueless about how much fire was about to ignite.

Fade out.



Chapter 18

The Dance Floor Duel

The Sharma household had never looked so alive. Strings of fairy lights twinkled from every balcony, marigold garlands hung across the doorway, and the faint crackle of diyas lined the marble entrance. A DJ console throbbed in the corner of the sprawling lawn, mixing Bollywood hits with a thumping bass line that made the ground vibrate. Guests in dazzling saris and sherwanis fluttered around like a kaleidoscope, laughter spilling into the crisp night air.

It was the sangeet of Kabir's cousin, and the entire family had been preparing for this evening for weeks. For Kabir, however, the thought of stepping into the glowing chaos made his stomach churn. He had been dreading this moment since Ritika's re-entry during the engagement. Tonight, he could already sense that something was about to spiral out of control.

"Bhai, smile na yaar!" shouted his cousin Rajiv, adjusting Kabir's sherwani collar. "You look like you're going to your execution, not a party."

Kabir forced a grin. "Execution might be easier. At least that's over quickly."

Rajiv smirked. "Relax, it's just family, music, and a bit of dancing."

Kabir muttered under his breath, “Yeah, and maybe a reality show elimination round while we’re at it.”

The chatter in the lawn suddenly rose a notch. Heads turned toward the gate. Entering in a shimmering emerald lehenga, hair styled in effortless waves, came Riya. She wasn’t a stranger to the family — her father was a business associate of Kabir’s uncle. But tonight, she carried herself with a confidence that commanded every eye in the courtyard.

“Oh ho, Riya bitiya! You’ve grown up so much,” one aunty exclaimed, practically squealing.

“Stunning, beta. Simply stunning,” added another.

Riya glided through the crowd, her bangles chiming like music. She spotted Kabir near the drinks counter and, with a smile that could light up a stage, walked straight toward him.

“Well, well, Mr. Sharma,” she purred, “long time no see.”

Kabir nearly choked on his juice. “Riya? Wow... uh, you look... different.”

“Different good, I hope,” she said with a wink.

Before Kabir could stammer another word, Riya turned to the nearby elders, her voice pitched high enough for half the guests to hear:

“Uncle, Aunty... you know, I always told Papa — Kabir would make such a perfect husband. Don’t you think?”

Gasps, laughter, and whispers rippled across the crowd. Kabir’s face went crimson.

“Arre, wah!” an uncle chuckled. “So direct! These modern girls, no shyness at all.”

“Aha, toh humari Riya bhi Kabir ki line mein hai?” teased another.

Kabir sputtered, “What line? There’s no line!”

But the spark had already been lit.

Ritika, standing nearby in a royal blue saree, froze at Riya’s declaration. Her smile tightened, but her eyes flared. She walked over, her heels clicking on the stone pathway, voice honeyed yet edged with steel.

“Uncle, Auntie... let’s not forget history. Kabir and I...” She let the words dangle, her gaze flicking to Kabir. “We already had something beautiful once. Some things don’t fade. Right, Kabir?”

Kabir shifted uncomfortably. “Uh... the samosas are really nice, have you tried them?”

The relatives burst out laughing. “Arre, what a situation!” one giggled. “One boy, two girls, and both ready to claim him.”

“Why not make it interesting?” another uncle suggested, mischief twinkling in his eyes. “We’ll hold a small competition. Let’s see who wins Kabir’s heart tonight!”

The crowd roared in approval, clapping and cheering.

Kabir groaned. “This is not a game show!”

But it was too late. The stage had been set.

The DJ switched tracks to a peppy Bollywood beat, and the crowd hooted.

“Ritika, you first!” an aunty cried, pushing her toward the dance floor.

Ritika gave a gracious nod, but her eyes locked onto Kabir. She started moving gracefully to the rhythm of a soulful love ballad. Every twirl, every sway seemed designed to remind Kabir of their past — of stolen office coffees, late-night project marathons, the sparks that once flew.

Her smile carried nostalgia; her eyes whispered promises of rekindling.

Kabir watched, conflicted. The memories stirred, yes, but so did the ache of why it had ended.

The crowd clapped enthusiastically as Ritika finished with a poised flourish.

Then Riya stepped forward. “My turn.”

She snapped her fingers at the DJ. The music shifted to a fiery, modern remix. Riya’s performance was bold, cheeky, and full of flair — a mashup of Bollywood and freestyle. She winked, tossed her dupatta dramatically, and mouthed lyrics straight at Kabir. Her message was clear: I’m the future. I’m fun. I’m the choice.

The guests whistled and clapped louder than before.

Kabir wanted to melt into the ground.

“Arre, why are we limiting this contest?” Meera’s mischievous voice rang out from the back. “We’ve got Naina here too. She dances better than all of them!”

Naina, who had been quietly standing by the corner in a delicate peach anarkali, stiffened. Her eyes widened in horror. "Meera! No!"

"Yes, yes!" the crowd chorused. "Naina, Naina!"

Kabir's eyes snapped to her, heart racing. He knew Naina hated public attention like this. He wanted to step in, save her — but the cheering was relentless.

Blushing furiously, Naina finally stepped forward. "This is ridiculous, I—"

But the DJ had already started another track.

Naina closed her eyes, took a breath, and then... she moved.

Her steps weren't flashy or seductive. They weren't about proving a point.

They were raw, fluid, heartfelt. Each spin, each delicate gesture, carried an honesty that pierced through the noise. Her eyes found Kabir's in the crowd, and for a moment, it felt like they were the only two people in the world.

It wasn't just a dance. It was a confession. Every sway whispered: I love you. I need you. I can't live without you.

When the music faded, silence fell. The same crowd that had roared with laughter and whistles now stood frozen, breathless.

Kabir's throat tightened. His chest ached.

Ritika broke the silence first, her voice sharp. "So that's your game, Naina? Pretend you're innocent, then put on a performance to steal him?"

Naina flinched but didn't look away from Kabir.

Riya scoffed. "Oh please. This isn't a fairy tale, Naina. Love doesn't pay bills or build futures. Kabir deserves someone like me — ambitious, bold, unafraid. Not a girl hiding behind soulful dance moves."

The relatives gasped. The drama had officially hit prime-time levels.

Kabir tried to intervene. "Stop it, all of you—"

But Ritika cut him off, her voice breaking now, desperation seeping through. "Kabir, you know what we had. You know I'm the one who truly understands you. I made a mistake leaving, and I won't make it again. I want you back."

The guests murmured louder.

Some supported Ritika, others Riya, and a few whispered, "But did you see Naina's dance? That was real love."

Finally, Naina couldn't hold it in anymore. Tears welled in her eyes, and in a trembling voice, she spoke — not just to Kabir, but to everyone.

"I was stupid. I thought I could stay away, that I could bury what I felt. But I can't. Kabir... without you, I can't breathe. I don't care about mistakes or the future or the past. All I know is — I love you. And I can't imagine my life without you."

The courtyard went dead silent. The music stopped. Even the fairy lights seemed to dim for a moment.

Kabir's heart thundered. Every word wrapped around him like a lifeline.

Ritika's face crumbled. Riya clenched her fists, furious but speechless.

And Kabir? He stood frozen, the weight of three women's confessions crashing down on him.

Before he could respond, someone from the family shouted:

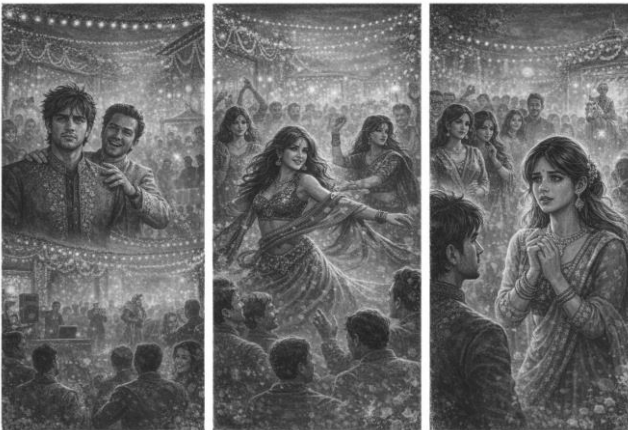
"Arre, the groom's baraat is calling! We must welcome them!"

The crowd suddenly scattered, rushing toward the entrance. The sangeet chaos was swallowed by wedding duties. But the damage was done.

Kabir remained rooted to the ground, eyes locked on Naina's tear-streaked face. His heart screamed to run to her, to hold her — but his feet refused to move. Ritika and Riya lingered close, both determined not to back down.

The stage had been set.

The showdown was no longer private. It was now a family spectacle, a public saga. And Kabir knew: nothing would be the same after tonight.



Chapter 19

The Morning After

The Sharma house looked like a battlefield the next morning. Not because anything had broken – though a couple of fairy lights had died out and the DJ console stood abandoned like a fallen warrior – but because of the whispers. The gossip hung heavier than the smell of last night’s biryani.

“Arre, did you see Ritika’s performance? Wah, she still has that charm.”

“No, no, you didn’t see Naina’s eyes. Beta, that girl was crying with her soul. That is true love!”

“Riya toh! Such confidence, such modern swag. That’s exactly what Kabir needs.”

The aunties buzzed like honeybees around cups of masala chai, each claiming expert knowledge of Kabir’s future. The uncles, meanwhile, nodded sagely as though they were sitting on the panel of Koffee With Karan.

Kabir was sprawled on his bed, eyes shut, groaning. The noise of his cousins’ laughter floated through the half-open window. His head wasn’t aching from alcohol – he hadn’t touched a drop – but from the sheer intensity of the drama last night.

He covered his face with a pillow. "God, why me? Why couldn't I be the boring cousin working in America? Nobody fights over him."

The door burst open. Rajiv, his partner in crime, bounded in with the energy of ten Red Bulls. "Rise and shine, dulhe-ke-bhai! The whole house is buzzing about you."

Kabir peeked out, horrified. "Already?"

"Already?! Dude, they started before the sun rose. Half the aunties couldn't sleep. You're officially the prime-time entertainment." Rajiv flopped onto the bed. "So, tell me — who gets your rose?"

Kabir glared. "This is not The Bachelor."

Rajiv smirked. "No? Feels exactly like it. Last night was the pilot episode. Today is elimination round."

Kabir groaned louder. "I swear, if one more person mentions swayamvar, I'll lock myself in the bathroom."

Kabir tiptoed out into the corridor, hair messy, trying to sneak toward the kitchen for chai. But two aunties materialized like ghosts.

"Beta Kabir!"

He froze. Abort mission.

One aunty patted his cheek. "Arre, you are very lucky. Three beautiful girls fighting for you."

The other added, eyes twinkling, "But between us, Ritika is best. She knows you already. History is important."

Kabir forced a polite smile. “Ji Aunty... chai ban rahi hogi, I’ll just—”

But they weren’t done. “Of course, Naina also... wah, that dance! Such emotion. Pure dil-se love.”

“And Riya... modern, smart, good family. Ambitious girl. Perfect bahu material.”

Kabir muttered, “Perfect way to kill me.” He ducked under their arms and bolted.

In the kitchen, a group of younger cousins had formed a mock panel. One cousin waved a spoon like a microphone. “Kabir bhaiyya, breaking news! Who wins your heart — Ritika, Riya, or Naina?”

The others chanted names, betting on who’d win.

Kabir snatched a paratha off a plate. “You people have too much free time. Go do homework.”

“But bhaiyya,” one cousin teased, “homework won’t get TRPs. You will.”

Kabir stuffed the paratha in his mouth and stormed out, chased by laughter.

In the living room, Ritika sat with Kabir’s mother and two aunties, her voice smooth as silk.

“You know, Aunty, Kabir and I once handled an entire client project alone in Singapore.

Three months, no sleep, no mistakes. He was brilliant. I was just proud to stand by him.”

His mother smiled faintly, clearly charmed. “Yes, beta, I remember. You both looked so good together.”

Ritika placed a hand over hers. “I made a mistake walking away. But trust me, Aunt, I’ve realized Kabir is the only one for me.”

Kabir, lurking at the doorway, nearly choked on his paratha. He escaped before anyone saw him,

muttering, “Fantastic. Now my ex is running PR campaigns.”

Meanwhile, Riya held court with some uncles.

“Uncle ji, tell me honestly — Kabir is talented, but sometimes lost, right? He needs someone bold, someone who’ll push him to greatness. That’s me. I’m ambitious, I have vision, I’ll make sure he shines.”

The uncles nodded thoughtfully. “Haan, haan. Very practical.”

Riya tossed her hair. “Exactly. This is not about past nostalgia or filmi love stories. This is about the future.”

Kabir, hearing from behind a pillar, smacked his forehead. Is this Bigg Boss?

In stark contrast, Naina was nowhere near the gossip circles. She immersed herself in helping the bride — arranging jewelry, managing mehndi cones, soothing anxious relatives.

But when Meera found her in the corner folding dupattas, her smile faltered.

“You’re overworking yourself,” Meera said gently.

Naina shook her head. “I’m fine. There’s too much to do.”

Meera caught her wrist. "You're crying again."

Naina blinked rapidly, eyes shimmering. "I can't stop it, Meera. I thought I could hold it in, but last night... I said everything. Now I don't know what's left."

Meera hugged her. "He heard you. Trust me, Kabir heard every word."

By afternoon, Kabir barricaded himself in Rajiv's room.

"I can't face anyone," he hissed.

Rajiv was rolling on the bed, laughing. "Bro, this is legendary. You're like a prize goat at a mela. Everyone's bidding."

Kabir glared. "I'm a human being, not livestock!"

"True," Rajiv said, "but if this were an Ekta Kapoor show, we'd be hitting episode 200 by now."

Kabir groaned. "Stop. Just... stop."

Later, Kabir slipped into the kitchen for water. Naina was there, back turned. He froze, heart hammering. For a second, he considered walking away. But she turned, eyes meeting his.

The air between them crackled. Words hovered unspoken. Then Naina lowered her gaze, brushed past him, and left. Kabir's chest ached.

Moments later, Ritika cornered him near the staircase. "Kabir," she said softly, "I know last night was messy. But you felt it too, didn't you? The way we used to be?"

Kabir swallowed hard. "Ritika—"

"Don't deny it," she whispered. "I won't lose you again. Not this time."

Before he could respond, Riya appeared from nowhere, looping her arm through his. “Kabir darling! Come taste this laddoo. Only I know how to feed you properly.”

The aunties watching nearby squealed. “Wah, what chemistry!”

Kabir wanted to disappear into thin air.

By sunset, Kabir was exhausted. He escaped into the garden, seeking silence. He breathed deeply, staring at the fading sky.

Then he heard a muffled sob.

Naina sat by the fountain, wiping tears, her dupatta crumpled in her lap.

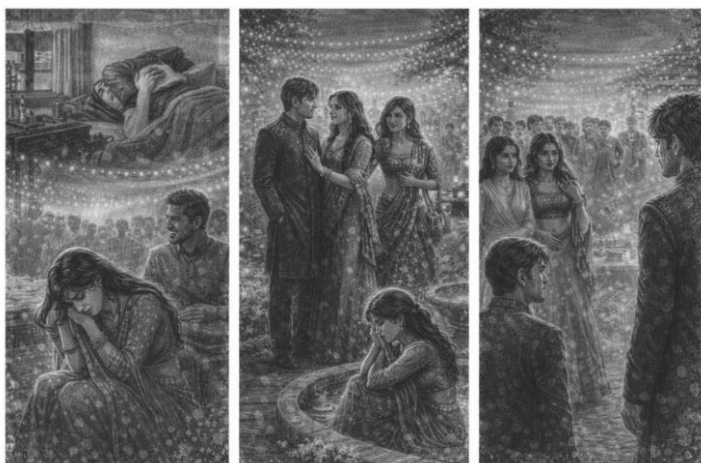
Kabir’s chest tightened. He stepped forward — but before he could speak, Ritika and Riya entered from opposite sides, eyes locking with each other, then with him.

The three women now stood in front of Kabir. Behind them, curious relatives began to gather, whispering, sensing another showdown.

Kabir’s heart raced. There was no exit left.

As the fairy lights flickered on, casting dramatic glows across the garden, Kabir realized the truth: tomorrow or the next, he would have to face this storm. There would be no more dodging.

And for the first time, he wasn’t sure if he was terrified — or relieved.



Chapter 20

Rollercoaster

The morning after the sangeet still glowed in everyone's memory, but for Kabir, the sparkles had dulled into an ache. Firecrackers, laughter, dance—the perfect Bollywood night—but he couldn't stop replaying the final scene: Naina's smile stiff, her eyes downcast, retreating quietly into the shadows while Ritika beamed in the limelight.

Now, as the sun streamed into the family house, chaos buzzed. Aunties fussed with flower garlands, cousins chased each other with trays of sweets, the sound of dhol rehearsals for tonight's mehendi thumped in the courtyard. But amid the noise, Kabir noticed something off—Naina was missing.

He finally spotted her near the balcony, carefully arranging marigold strands, her face serene but distant. She wasn't looking at him. She wasn't even humming like she usually did when busy with chores. Just silence.

It hit him harder than words.

Naina had barely slept. All night, her mind whirled with images—Ritika's triumphant smile, Kabir's stunned silence, the family's approving nods. She knew what they all wanted. What they had always wanted. Ritika was perfect—on paper, in status, in family approval.

And Naina? She was the hardworking outsider, a convenient friend until real options appeared.

So she did what she always did: turned pain into practicality. Before dawn, she pulled out her laptop, logged into her email, and reread the message from Dr. Sen—her old mentor from business school—who had casually mentioned an opening in a firm in Singapore. A thought had flickered then. Now it blazed.

By sunrise, she'd half-written her acceptance note. By breakfast, she'd already checked flights. She hadn't hit "send" yet. But the decision sat in her chest like a stone.

Better to leave with dignity than stay and watch her heart be broken piece by piece.

Kabir stumbled through his morning like a zombie. His cousins teased him mercilessly—

"Arre, Kabir bhai! Ritika bhabhi was looking at you with so much love last night!"

"Don't worry, bhai, we'll handle the wedding dance steps for you two!"

He forced laughs, but his insides churned. He remembered Ritika's hand clutching his arm, the way his family clapped approvingly, and how Naina quietly excused herself with a polite smile no one else noticed.

It wasn't just guilt. It was loss. He realized how much he'd grown used to Naina being there—for every silly joke, every chaos, every quiet word of reason. Her absence was louder than Ritika's entire performance.

By midmorning, Ritika cornered him in the garden. She looked gorgeous, dressed casually in a pastel kurta, sunglasses perched on her head. It could've been years ago, when they'd sat on this very lawn in their office offsite retreat, laughing over bad chai.

"Kabir," she began softly, her voice dipped in honey, "last night felt like old times, didn't it?"

He blinked. "Old times?"

"You and me. Everyone cheering us on. It felt right. Natural. Don't you think?"

Kabir hesitated. He remembered those days. How heady it had been—late nights at the office, whispered jokes, stolen lunches. He had loved her, maybe truly for the first time. And then—

"You left," he said quietly.

Ritika's smile flickered. "Kabir, I had an opportunity abroad. It was my career. I had to go. You know that."

"You didn't just go, Ritika. You vanished." His voice trembled, not with anger but with the ache of old scars. "No calls. No goodbyes. Just silence. Do you know what that did to me?"

Her eyes softened, but her tone sharpened. "I thought you'd understand. You always said you wanted me to succeed. I didn't think... I didn't think you'd fall apart without me."

Kabir's fists clenched. Fall apart was an understatement. Those months after she ghosted him had been the darkest—he'd drowned himself in late-night parties, fake smiles, endless noise just to block the emptiness. His carefree laziness hadn't

been natural—it had been survival. Depression disguised as charm.

And here she was, brushing it off like a detail.

“I’m here now, Kabir,” Ritika said, her hand sliding onto his. “I made a mistake. But I’m back to make it right. We can be what we were. Better. You just have to choose.”

Her words were perfect. Her touch familiar. But for the first time, they didn’t feel like home.

Later, as if on cue, Riya found him. Always impeccably dressed, sharp-eyed, she carried herself like a CEO even at a family function.

“Kabir,” she said briskly, “I know things are confusing right now. But let’s be clear. We’d make sense. You’re fun, I’m focused. You’d balance my ambition; I’d anchor your dreams. It’s practical. Families approve. Careers align. It’s... neat.”

Kabir stared at her, lost. Neat. Practical. Words that felt like cement. Safe, maybe. But empty.

He muttered something about needing air and left her standing in the corridor, arms crossed in annoyance.

By evening, Naina finally confided in Meera.

“I can’t stay here, Meera,” she whispered, eyes glistening. “Every look, every conversation... it’s suffocating. I thought I could handle it, but watching him with her—it’s too much. I can’t breathe.”

Meera grabbed her hand. “Naina, don’t. Please don’t make decisions in anger—”

“This isn’t anger. It’s survival,” Naina cut in. “Dr. Sen said there’s an opening in Singapore. I’ve already drafted my acceptance. Maybe this is my chance to start fresh.”

Her voice cracked. “Maybe... maybe Kabir was never meant for me.”

Meera’s heart broke, but Naina’s eyes were steady. She had always been the practical one. Even in heartbreak, she chose dignity.

That night, unable to sleep, Kabir wandered into the garden. The lanterns from the sangeet still hung, swaying in the breeze. He sank onto a bench, exhausted.

And there it was—Naina’s dupatta, caught on the branch of a shrub, fluttering in the moonlight. She must have dropped it earlier.

Kabir picked it up, pressed it to his chest, and closed his eyes. Memories flooded—

Naina scolding him for being late to the airport.

Naina laughing when he spilled chai on himself in Amsterdam.

Naina covering for his mistakes during the seminar.

Naina standing by him, silently, every time his world tilted.

All the little sacrifices. All the quiet strength. All the things Ritika had never given, Riya could never understand.

His throat tightened.

“This whole time...” he whispered. “It was you, Naina. Always you.”

For the first time in years, clarity cut through his confusion. Ritika's betrayal wasn't a ghost anymore—it was a closed chapter. Riya's practicality wasn't love—it was a transaction.

Naina was the one.

He shot to his feet, heart racing. He had to find her. Now.

But the house was quiet. Her room locked. Her phone unanswered.

Panic surged.

Upstairs, in the faint glow of her laptop, Naina sat with her finger hovering over the "Confirm Ticket" button for Singapore.

Downstairs, Kabir whispered into the night, clutching her dupatta like a lifeline:

"I can't lose her. Not again."

The world spun toward collision.



Chapter 21

The morning after the sangeet felt like a hangover without alcohol.

The house roared awake with laughter, music rehearsals, and relatives gossiping in every corner. Plates of steaming pocha and chai clinked in the dining room, uncles argued about who had the best cricket cover drive, aunties compared jewelry, and children ran in circles chasing ladoos.

But inside all this color and chaos, Naina moved like a ghost.

She carried trays, folded dupattas, helped Meera organize marigold strings, but there was no sparkle in her eyes. No small smile when a cousin cracked a joke, no playful scolding when Kabir lazily snuck ladoos off the trays. She just worked—silently, efficiently, invisibly.

Meera noticed. Of course she did. She watched her friend's face carefully as Naina nodded politely at relatives who asked about her job, about her future. She deflected every question with the grace of someone who had already made up her mind.

Because Naina had.

At dawn, before anyone had woken, she had pulled her suitcase out and quietly started filling it—one kurta at a time, one book at a time. She hid it beneath the bed again, zipped up tight.

The laptop was open with her email draft: “Dear Dr. Sen, I accept your offer.

Thank you for believing in me.”

It sat there, unsent but final.

Meera whispered to her while they were stringing flowers, “You’re really doing this?”

Naina didn’t look up. “I have to. Every corner of this house reminds me I don’t belong. Better to leave before I make a fool of myself.”

Her voice was flat. Practical. But her fingers trembled as she tied the marigold knot.

Kabir, on the other hand, had barely slept. His bed looked like a warzone, pillows scattered, Naina’s dupatta still crumpled in his fist.

By morning, his cousins found him slumped at the table, hair a mess, eyes bloodshot. Naturally, they pounced.

“Arre Kabir bhai, last night was filmi! Ritika bhabhi stealing the show!”

“Did you see the way she held your hand? Wah wah, shaadi confirmed!”

“Bas, we’ll start rehearsing your baraat entry now!”

Kabir forced a laugh, but when one cousin mimed putting a sehra on his head, he snapped: “Bas karo, yaar!”

The room froze. Kabir never snapped. He was the joker, the easy-breezy one. The cousins exchanged stunned looks as he stormed off.

By mid-morning, the “competition” began in earnest.

Ritika, dressed in a yellow anarkali that shimmered in the sun, sat surrounded by aunties.

She laughed lightly, tossing her hair, while casually mentioning how she and Kabir “used to be inseparable.”

The older women ate it up, nodding approvingly.

“Ritika beta, you were always like family to us.”

“Such grace, such manners. You and Kabir—perfect jodi.”

Ritika beamed, her eyes darting to where Naina passed by with a tray of chai. “Not everyone can handle such big families,” she said sweetly, her voice dripping with sugar. “It takes... patience.”

Naina didn’t flinch, just lowered her gaze and set the tray down.

Riya, on the other hand, wasn’t about to let Ritika monopolize the stage. She strode in confidently, crisp in a simple cotton kurta but with the air of someone about to deliver a presentation.

“Frankly, aunty,” Riya cut in, “what Kabir needs is someone modern. Someone who can match his energy but also bring stability. I mean, love is nice, but partnership is about vision. Ritika’s lovely, but she’s... nostalgic. Kabir needs a future.”

The aunties tittered, amused at the implied jab. Someone muttered, “Arre wah, swayamvar chal raha hai kya?” and the room erupted in laughter.

Kabir wanted to sink into the floor.

That afternoon, Ritika found him near the veranda, staring aimlessly at the garden. She slid next to him, her perfume familiar, almost suffocating.

“Kabir,” she said softly, “don’t mind the competition. They’re just jealous. You and I—we’re meant to be.”

Kabir looked at her, tired. “Ritika, do you even hear yourself?” She tilted her head, amused. “What do you mean?”

“You left me,” he said simply.

Her smile faltered. “Kabir, we’ve talked about this. My career came first. I had to take that job abroad.”

“You didn’t just take the job. You ghosted me. No goodbye, no explanation, nothing. Do you know what that did to me?”

Ritika sighed, exasperated. “I thought you’d understand. I thought you’d... cope. You were always the fun one, the strong one.”

He let out a bitter laugh. “Strong? I was in pieces, Ritika. You left me in depression. I put on a show for everyone else, but inside, I was drowning. And you never looked back.”

Ritika’s eyes softened, almost guilty, but then hardened again. “I had to choose me, Kabir. And I don’t regret it. But I regret losing you. That’s why I’m here now—to fix it.”

She touched his arm. It should have felt like old times. Instead, Kabir felt nothing but the weight of betrayal.

Not long after, Riya appeared with her trademark timing. She blocked his path in the corridor, hands on her hips.

“Listen, Kabir,” she said, no-nonsense. “I know Ritika’s playing the nostalgia card. But let’s be realistic. You and I make sense. We both know how to handle modern life. You’re spontaneous, I’m strategic. Families love me. We’d be unstoppable together.”

Kabir stared at her, unimpressed. “Unstoppable? This isn’t a merger, Riya.”

She smirked. “Marriage is a merger, Kabir. You’ll see. Practicality lasts longer than butterflies.”

He muttered something about fresh air and walked away, leaving her fuming.

Meanwhile, in her room, Naina finalized her decision.

The Singapore ticket confirmation glowed on her laptop screen. She hadn’t clicked Confirm yet, but she had entered her details. Her passport sat on the bed, ready. Her suitcase, half-packed, tucked neatly away.

Meera hovered, distraught. “Naina, please don’t. At least talk to him before you run.”

Naina shook her head. “Talk? To say what? That I love him while his family cheers for someone else? No, Meera. I won’t beg for scraps of affection. If he wanted me, I’d know it by now.”

Her voice was calm. Too calm. Like the stillness before a storm.

By late evening, Kabir had had enough. He found Naina outside, near the tulsi plant, carefully lighting diyas. Her face glowed in the flicker, but her eyes were far away.

“Naina,” he said, breathless.

She didn’t turn. “You should be inside. Ritika and Riya are probably waiting.”

“Why are you avoiding me?” he demanded. “Why won’t you even look at me?”

She laughed bitterly, finally facing him. “Because soon you’ll be Ritika’s. Or Riya’s. Or whoever your family decides. What difference does it make if I look at you?”

Kabir stepped closer, voice shaking. “It makes all the difference! Don’t you see—”

“Arre, Naina beta!” an auntie called from inside, breaking the moment. “Where are you? The mehendi tray is waiting!”

Naina picked up the diya plate, eyes cold. “Go inside, Kabir. Your future’s waiting too.”

She walked past him without looking back.

That night, Kabir wandered past Naina’s room, desperate. Through the half-open door, he saw her bed: a neatly stacked pile, her passport, and the glow of her laptop screen.

He froze. The page was unmistakable: Singapore Airlines – Confirm Ticket.

His chest tightened. She was leaving.

Not just avoiding him. Not just angry. Leaving.

He backed away, clutching the dupatta still tucked in his pocket, his voice breaking in a whisper only the night could hear:

“Not if I can help it.”

We: A Journey

And for the first time, Kabir felt something unfamiliar but fierce—resolve.



Chapter 22

Scene Map

(The Public Confrontation)

The next morning arrived with the sound of dhols, laughter, and aunties shrieking as mehendi cones squirted henna in uneven patterns. The courtyard had been transformed into a riot of colors: orange marigold garlands dripping from every corner, floor covered in intricate rangolis, and cousins sprinting about with trays of sweets.

It should have felt festive. For Kabir, it felt like a battleground.

Kabir stood at the balcony, the morning breeze hitting his face. In his pocket, still, was Naina's dupatta. He clenched it like it was a lifeline. He had spent half the night staring at that Singapore Airlines page glowing from her laptop screen, unable to breathe.

She was leaving.

And today, if he didn't do something, he would lose her forever.

Downstairs, the voices of Ritika and Riya rang louder than the dhol.

The mehendi artist had barely sat down when the aunties started circling.

“Arre, Ritika beta, write Kabir’s name in your mehendi! Haye, so romantic!”

Ritika smiled like a queen accepting her crown. “Of course, aunty. I’ll put it right here.” She lifted her hand and flashed a smile toward Kabir, who winced.

Meanwhile, Riya wasn’t about to be outshone. She plopped down on the opposite cushion, stuck out her hand, and declared loudly, “And I’ll put ‘Kabir’ in mine too—let’s see who finds it first, hmm?”

The cousins howled. The aunties giggled, their whispers like knives in Naina’s ears as she quietly served trays of sharbat.

Someone even joked, “Dekho, swayamvar chal raha hai!”

Kabir’s fists tightened.

When Naina bent down to serve a plate, Ritika “accidentally” stretched out her hand. The glass tipped and orange sharbat spilled over Naina’s dupatta.

“Oh no!” Ritika gasped, a little too sweetly. “I’m so clumsy! I hope it wasn’t expensive, Naina.”

The aunties tittered, one murmuring, “Poor girl. She doesn’t belong in this drama.”

Naina’s face burned, but she said nothing. She excused herself to clean up, her shoulders straight, her eyes betraying nothing.

Ritika smirked, leaning closer to the group of women. “She’s nice, but... you know. Some people just don’t fit in these big families.”

Not to be outdone, Riya pounced the moment Naina returned.

“You work so hard, Naina,” she said, loud enough for the whole room to hear. “Serving, running around. But honestly, do you think that’s what Kabir needs? He needs someone who can be his equal. Not someone who hides in the background.”

The aunties nodded, whispering, “She’s right. Kabir deserves someone strong.”

Naina lowered her eyes, swallowing hard. Kabir, watching from across the room, felt rage coil in his stomach.

That’s when it happened. One mischievous cousin dragged Kabir forward, laughter bubbling.

“Bhai! Decide today! Ritika or Riya? Or...” He looked around dramatically. “Or someone else hiding in the shadows?”

The room roared with laughter.

Kabir froze, every eye on him. Naina set down the tray and took a step back, ready to vanish into the background.

“Enough!” Kabir’s voice cut like glass.

The dhol stopped mid-beat. Laughter died instantly. The courtyard fell into stunned silence.

“Stop treating my life like a joke!” Kabir’s chest heaved, his voice shaking. “I’m not a prize in your swayamvar. I’m not some doll to be passed around.”

Gasps rippled through the crowd. Aunties clutched pearls, uncles frowned.

Ritika stood, her face calm but her eyes flashing. “Kabir, relax. They’re just teasing.” She reached for his arm.

He yanked it back. “No. No more pretending.”

Kabir turned to Ritika, his voice cracking with years of pain.

“You left me when I needed you the most. You didn’t just choose your career. You left me to rot in depression. You ghosted me like I didn’t matter.”

The crowd murmured, shocked.

Ritika’s jaw tightened. “Kabir, I was young! I made a mistake. But I’m here now, aren’t I? Doesn’t that mean something?”

“It means nothing,” Kabir spat. “Because love isn’t something you switch on when it suits you.”

Riya, never one to be silenced, jumped in. “And what about me? At least I’m honest! At least I can offer you stability and vision. Ritika is the past. I’m the future.”

Kabir turned, his eyes blazing. “You’re not the future, Riya. Because I don’t want a contract. I don’t want a business merger. I want love. And you’ll never understand that.”

Riya’s face turned red. “Love doesn’t pay bills, Kabir!” she snapped, before storming off in humiliation.

The room buzzed with whispers.

And then, silence. All eyes turned to the quiet figure by the door—Naina, standing frozen, tears glistening in her eyes.

Kabir stepped toward her, his voice breaking.

“It was always her. From the very beginning. Naina.”

Gasps. Shocked faces. Aunties whispering furiously.

Kabir reached into his pocket and pulled out the dupatta, holding it high. “This... this has been with me since last night. Her. She’s the one I love.”

Naina shook her head, her voice trembling. “Kabir... don’t. Your family doesn’t want me. Ritika, Riya—they’re better. They belong here. I don’t.”

Kabir took another step, his eyes locked on hers. “You belong more than anyone. Because you’re the only one who’s stayed. You’re the only one who saw me at my lowest and didn’t run. You’re the only one I can’t live without.”

Reactions exploded around them:

- One aunty clutched her chest, muttering about scandal.
- Cousins cheered, whistling like it was a movie climax.
- Kabir’s father looked torn, pride battling with societal pressure.
- His mother’s eyes glistened, her lips pressed tight.
- Meera, at the back, clasped her hands together and whispered, “Finally.”

Kabir held out his hand, his voice steady now.

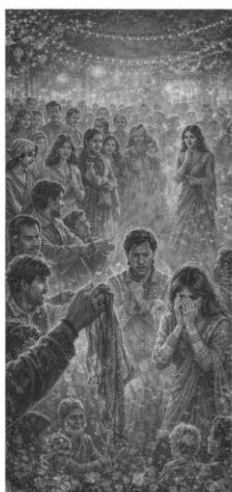
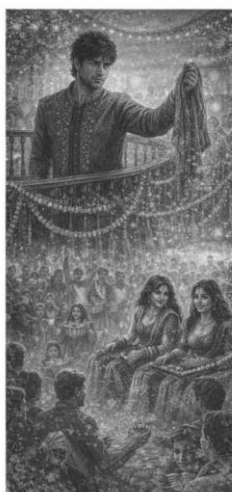
“Naina. Stay. With me.”

The courtyard held its breath. Ritika’s eyes blazed with fury. Riya sneered from the corner, humiliated but defiant. Relatives murmured, half-scandalized, half-thrilled.

And Naina, trembling, whispered through her tears:

“Kabir... I can’t.”

The dhol beat again, shattering the silence.



Chapter 23

The Resolution

The courtyard was still ringing with the echo of Naina's trembling words.

"I can't."

For a moment, the only sound was the dholak player nervously tapping once, then stopping when no one joined. Marigold petals swayed in the breeze. Even the birds seemed to hush.

Kabir stood in the center, her dupatta still clutched in his hand, his chest heaving. His eyes searched Naina's face, desperate, refusing to believe. The world had blurred around them, but her words stung sharper than anything Ritika or Riya had thrown.

"See?" an aunty whispered, not as quietly as she thought. "The girl herself has said no."

Another chimed in, "Better she says it now than later. Ritika was always the better match."

Naina's hands trembled as she set down the tray she'd been carrying, her eyes fixed on the floor. She wanted to disappear into it. She wanted the earth to swallow her whole before she saw the disappointment in Kabir's face.

But Kabir didn't retreat. He didn't look away.

"Naina," he said, his voice cracking, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Don't do this. Not like this. Not after everything." He stepped closer, the dupatta held like an oath.

"Do you even know what you are to me? You're the girl who held my hand when I couldn't find my way. You're the one who fought me, argued with me, called me lazy, and still... still made me believe I could be more.

When I was making a mess in Amsterdam, you were the only thing that made sense. When I was lost in my own chaos, you were my calm."

Naina blinked furiously, the tears threatening to spill.

Kabir's voice rose, raw and vulnerable: "You are my reason. You are the only thing I've ever been sure of. And if you think I'm going to let you walk away because of what these people want, then you don't know me at all."

The crowd buzzed. Whispers. Gasps. Some eyes softening, others narrowing in judgment.

Ritika pushed through the crowd, her face a mask of poise but her voice sharp.

"Kabir, stop humiliating yourself. She doesn't even want you. I'm right here. I've always been the one who fit, the one your family wanted. Why can't you see that?"

Kabir turned to her, his eyes blazing. "Because you stopped being here the day you left me to crumble. You chose your career. You left me alone in that apartment, wondering if I even mattered.

And now, when it's convenient, you've returned, expecting everything to be the same? That's not love, Ritika. That's convenience."

Ritika's lips trembled, her eyes flashing with tears she wouldn't allow to fall.

"You think you've won something real here? She'll break you, Kabir. Just like I did."

And with that, she turned, her heels clicking against the stone courtyard, vanishing into the crowd.

Riya seized the silence. "Well," she said with a bitter laugh, "at least Ritika admits it. But Kabir, let's be practical. Do you think this—" she gestured sharply at Naina, "—is going to last? You need someone who can build a life with you. Someone strong. Someone like me. Not someone too scared to even say yes."

The aunties murmured, nodding in agreement. But something shifted—others frowned at Riya's sharpness, at her open cruelty.

Kabir cut her off, his voice thunderous. "I don't need a contract, Riya. I don't need a merger. I don't need your idea of strength. I need love. And if you can't understand that, then you never had a chance."

Riya's face burned crimson. "Love doesn't pay bills, Kabir. But fine. Ruin your life." She grabbed her purse and stalked out, her bangles jangling with fury.

And then, silence again. The crowd's eyes turned back to Naina.

She couldn't hide anymore. Her chest ached, her throat closed, and before she could stop herself, the words burst out.

"You don't understand, Kabir!" Her voice cracked, and the crowd leaned in.

"I'm scared. I'm terrified. You're reckless, you're lazy, you live like tomorrow doesn't matter—and I've spent my whole life planning every step. I don't know if I can handle a future where

everything rests on you changing. And your family—" she glanced around at the judgmental faces "—they don't want me here. They never will. I don't belong."

Her tears fell now, unstoppable, her whole body shaking.

Kabir stepped forward, gently but firmly taking her hand.

"Then be scared," he whispered, though the entire courtyard could hear. "But don't run. Because I'll fight every battle with you. Every auntie, every uncle, every mistake I make—I'll fight them all if it means you're with me. But I can't fight if you're gone."

The silence stretched. Then Kabir's father sighed deeply, his voice low. "I've never seen him like this before."

An uncle muttered, "But what about society? What will people say?"

His mother, eyes wet, finally spoke. "People will always say something. But I've never seen my son speak with such certainty. And if this girl makes him this sure, then maybe she is the right one."

Cousins whooped and whistled, breaking the tension. One yelled, "Finally! We've had enough of this love triangle soap opera!" Laughter rippled through the younger crowd, easing the tightness in the air.

Kabir turned back to Naina, his hand still holding hers. His voice was soft now, trembling.

"Naina. Stay. With me."

The courtyard held its breath. The marigolds seemed to glow brighter.

Naina looked into his eyes, saw the rawness there, the promise, the desperation.

Her heart pounded, her fear warring with the love that had been swelling since the day she met him.

Finally, her lips parted. Her voice was a whisper, but it carried like thunder.

"I love you too much to leave."

The dam broke. She stumbled into his arms, sobbing, and he held her like the world depended on it. Cheers erupted. Cousins clapped, aunties wiped their eyes, uncles shook their heads but smiled despite themselves.

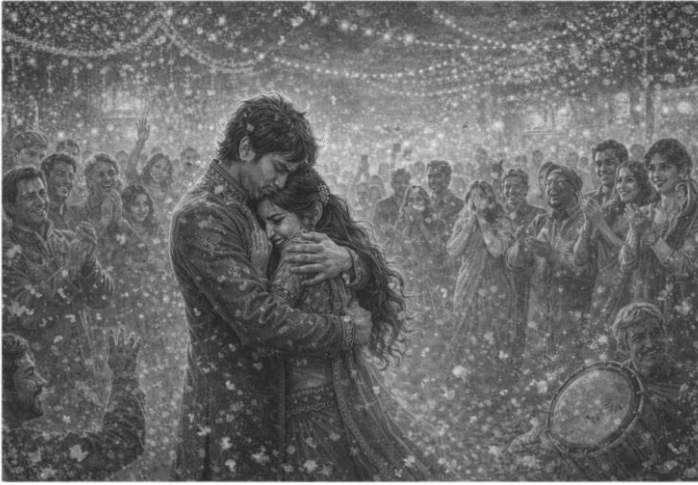
Music blasted again, the mehendi resuming not as ritual but as celebration. Someone threw petals in the air. The dholak picked up, faster this time, matching the heartbeat of the moment.

Kabir pressed his forehead to Naina's, whispering,

"See? Even Bollywood couldn't write a better ending than this."

She laughed through her tears, swatting his chest. “Idiot. This isn’t the ending.”

And in that courtyard, surrounded by chaos and judgment and laughter, Kabir and Naina finally stood together—unbroken, unstoppable.



Chapter 24

Shaadi Wala Engagement

The morning after the storm felt like the house had collectively taken a deep breath. Gone were the angry whispers and dagger-eyed stares of yesterday's showdown. Instead, laughter and chaos filled the corridors once again.

Kabir woke up to the sound of drums—yes, actual dhol drums—being practiced by overenthusiastic cousins in the garden. He groaned, pulled a pillow over his face, and muttered, “Bas yaar, shaadi meri hai ya band ka audition?”

From the other side of the room, his cousin Arjun laughed. “Shaadi toh teri hi hai, bhai. Lekin dhol hum bajayenge, mood banayenge!”

Kabir sat up, hair messy, eyes still half shut. “Shaadi meri hai? Who decided?”

Arjun smirked. “Tu ne, kal sab ke saamne ekdum Shah Rukh style mein announcement kar diya. Ab tu bhaag ke dikha.”

Kabir's heart did a funny flip. He remembered the scene vividly—his voice echoing in the hall, his eyes locked on Naina's tearful ones, his chest swelling with certainty as he had declared her as his forever.

It was out there now. There was no taking it back. And strangely... he didn't want to.

Downstairs, Naina was already cornered in the kitchen. Aunties crowded around her like she was a contestant on MasterChef India.

“Beta, ab toh tum hamari bahu ho. Dekhna, shaadi ke baad tumhe parathe banane padenge,” one said, poking her playfully.

Another added, “Aur subah 5 baje utho, ghar ke sabse pehle tumhari duty hogi!”

Naina tried to smile, but her cheeks burned. She turned towards Meera, whispering, “Save me. Please.”

Meera winked. “Arre, chill. Yeh toh standard hazing hai. Tu toh lucky hai, Kal ke showdown ke baad sabko tu heroine lag rahi hai.”

Before Naina could reply, Kabir walked into the kitchen, hair still messy, his white kurta looking too casual for all this shaadi shor-sharaba. He yawned loudly and grinned at her.

“Good morning, meri dulhan,” he announced.

Naina choked on her chai. The aunties gasped and then immediately broke into giggles.

“Dekha? Abhi se dulhan bulata hai!”

Kabir leaned closer, whispering just for her ears, “Don’t worry, I’ll save you from the paratha army.”

“Save yourself first,” Naina shot back, glaring—but her lips curved despite herself.

By noon, the elders called a “meeting.” Kabir and Naina sat side by side, surrounded by parents, uncles, aunties, and cousins all buzzing with excitement.

Kabir's father cleared his throat dramatically. "Beta, kal tumne sabke saamne faisla kar diya. Toh ab humne bhi faisla kar liya hai."

Naina stiffened. Kabir raised an eyebrow.

His mother chimed in, "Engagement will be tonight. No more waiting. Tum dono ne humein enough tamasha kara diya hai."

Kabir nearly choked. "TONIGHT? Matlab, like, aaj?"

"Ji haan," his mother said sternly, but her eyes twinkled. "Humne decorator bula liya hai. Mehmaan already ghar pe hain. Tum dono ne shaadi ki filmy script likh hi di hai, toh hum bas interval ka wait nahi kar rahe."

The cousins cheered. Aunties clapped. Someone started throwing flower petals then and there.

Naina wanted the ground to swallow her whole. But when she looked sideways at Kabir, he was grinning like a fool, his eyes sparkling with mischief. And despite the chaos, her heart did that fluttery, filmi thing again.

The house turned into a circus by afternoon.

Naina was dragged into a room full of lehengas—bright pinks, emerald greens, golden embroidery that blinded her. Cousins debated loudly.

"This one makes you look like a maharani!"

"No, no, this red one is perfect. Classic!"

"Arre, dulhan ho ya disco ball? Yeh glitter wala mat pehna."

Naina protested, "Guys, mujhe simple chahiye—" but no one listened.

Meanwhile, in another room, Kabir faced his own torture. The tailor held up a sherwani.

“Sir, try this one.”

Kabir frowned. “Itna heavy kyun hai? Mujhe laga sherwani stylish hoti hai, yeh toh armour lag rahi hai.”

The tailor rolled his eyes. “Shaadi hai, kabaddi match nahi.”

Kabir tried one on and groaned. “Meri body toh ismein gayab ho gayi. Aur yeh tummy dikh raha hai!”

The tailor smirked. “Tummy aapka hai, sherwani ka nahi.”

The cousins nearly died laughing.

Evening approached, the lights and flowers made the courtyard glow like a Bollywood set. The engagement thaal was ready, sweets lined up, and relatives had gathered.

Except—there was a problem.

The ring was missing.

Kabir patted his kurta pocket. Empty. He patted the other. Only toffees. He patted his jeans pocket. Just a handkerchief.

“Uh-oh.”

Within minutes, the whole family was in uproar.

“Kabir lost the ring!”

“Arey, is ladke ko kuch samajh nahi!”

“Abhi se careless ho, shaadi ke baad kya hoga?”

Kabir’s ears burned. He stammered, “I swear it was here—”

Secretly, Naina had found it hours ago when he had left his kurta on a chair. She slipped it into her clutch, a wicked smile on her lips.

When Kabir panicked beside her, she whispered slyly, “Looking for something?”

Kabir groaned. “Tumne liya hai?”

She shook her head innocently.

The drama stretched until the family was near tears. Then, just as Kabir’s mother was about to call the jeweler for a replacement, Naina pulled it out with a mischievous twinkle.

Gasps, laughter, and mock scolding followed. Kabir glared at her but couldn’t help laughing too.

When he finally slid the ring onto her finger, his hand trembled just a little. “You drive me mad,” he whispered.

Naina smiled softly. “Good. Now you know how I feel.”

The cousins announced, “Dance battle time!”

Kabir groaned. “Mujhe dance nahi aata.”

But no one cared. He was pushed on stage with his cousins, while Naina’s cousins lined up opposite. The music blasted—Bollywood remixes, dhol beats, whistles.

Kabir flailed through the choreography, earning hoots and whistles. He even tripped once, nearly crashing into the DJ table.

Naina, graceful as ever, stepped in, grabbed his hand, and saved him from total disaster. Together they improvised—her leading, him following, until the crowd clapped wildly.

Then someone shouted, "Couple dance!"

The lights dimmed, a romantic track began, and Kabir pulled Naina close.

"Everyone's watching," she whispered.

"Let them," he murmured, his cheek brushing hers. "You're mine now anyway."

Her cheeks burned redder than her lehenga.

Meera became Naina's unofficial PR manager, scolding aunties who tried to overfeed her sweets.

A cousin attempted to flirt with Naina's friend Priya, only to be slapped down with, "Shaadi pe aaye ho ya Tinder pe?"

The elders had a heated debate about whether the food should've had more paneer dishes. One uncle yelled, "Paneer hi asli shaadi ka hero hota hai!"

The whole courtyard buzzed with laughter and chaos.

Later that night, after the dances and teasing, Kabir managed to sneak Naina away to the terrace. The fairy lights twinkled above, the sound of laughter echoed below.

"You know," he said softly, "I've never been this sure of anything before."

Naina looked at him, her eyes reflecting both joy and fear. "What if... what if Ritika or Riya come back? What if this chaos starts again?"

Kabir took her hands firmly. "Then I'll shut the door on them myself. This time, I'm not letting go of you. Not ever."

Her eyes misted. For the first time, she believed him completely.

Just as they returned to the courtyard, petals rained down on them as the family shouted, “Congratulations!”

The rings glittered, the sweets were distributed, music blasted again.

But then—at the entrance of the courtyard, a shadow appeared.

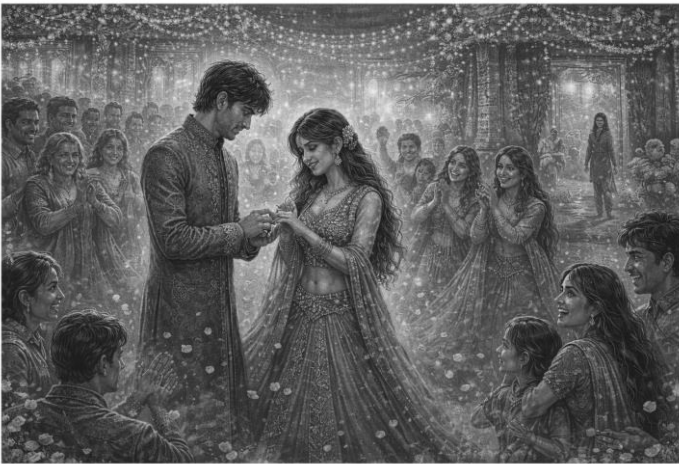
A figure stood quietly, watching. The music, the laughter, the celebration—all oblivious.

It was only Naina who felt a sudden chill.

She turned, just catching a glimpse of sharp heels and familiar poise disappearing into the night.

Ritika.

The celebration roared on, but Naina’s heart skipped.



Chapter 25

Shaadi, Shaadi, Shaadi!

If there was one thing Kabir had always feared, it was being trapped in a wedding he couldn't escape. But this time, standing at the mandap, dressed in cream-and-gold sherwani, sword in hand (because his cousins insisted every dulha looked more royal with a talwar), Kabir didn't want to run. He wanted to freeze this moment forever.

Beside him, Naina sat in her red-and-gold lehenga, dupatta draped elegantly over her head, looking like every filmi heroine rolled into one.

Her eyes sparkled despite the kajal and nervousness, and Kabir leaned closer as the pandit droned, whispering, "You look like you've stepped straight out of Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. Bas, train ka wait kar raha hoon."

Naina smothered a laugh. "Shaadi mandap hai, train platform nahi."

Their friends and family crowded around, phones flashing, kids running wild, aunties gossiping. The chaos was pure Bollywood.

The baraat had been nothing short of a circus. Kabir's cousins had danced so hard the DJ begged for water. His uncle tripped

over the horse. His mother nearly fainted when Kabir broke into “Kala Chashma” mid-procession.

At one point, Kabir even shouted from the horse, “Stop the band! Dulhan ke ghar ka WiFi password chahiye!”

The entire lane exploded with laughter, and Naina, watching secretly from her room, muttered, “Why am I marrying this clown?”

The pheras themselves were an event. The pandit kept scolding Kabir for cracking jokes mid-ritual.

“Beta, mantras mein dhyaan lagao!”

“Panditji, bas ek sawal—Netflix subscription ka paisa kaun dega shaadi ke baad?” Kabir whispered loudly, earning a chorus of giggles.

Naina smacked his arm under her dupatta. “Shut up!”

During the mangalphera, Kabir deliberately slowed down, letting Naina go ahead, then teasing, “See? Abhi se dulhan mujhe lead kar rahi hai.”

The family roared. The pandit rolled his eyes. Naina blushed furiously.

The joota chhupai nearly bankrupted Kabir. Naina’s cousins demanded 50,000 rupees. Kabir bargained like he was in Crawford Market.

“Arre, 5,000 se zyada nahi dunga. Yeh chappal Reliance ka share hai kya?”

Finally, they settled for 21,000 and Kabir muttered, “Bhai, shoes kharid leta naye.”

Then came the grih pravesha. Naina was made to kick the kalash filled with rice, but Kabir secretly whispered, “Kick softly, warna kalash toot gaya toh EMI main bharoonga.”

Everyone burst out laughing, and Naina, flustered, ended up kicking so softly the kalash barely moved an inch.

That night, their room was decorated like a flower shop had exploded—roses, candles, heart-shaped balloons. Kabir opened the door and groaned, “Arey yeh kya hai? Bedroom hai ya Shaadi.com ka advertisement?”

Naina laughed nervously, but when she sat on the bed, Kabir mischievously pushed one balloon, making a loud pop. She screamed. He doubled over laughing.

Then he softened, pulling her closer. “Relax, dulhanji. I promise, no more pranks... at least tonight.”

Their laughter melted into quiet whispers, then silence. The chaos of the world disappeared, leaving just the two of them.

The next few months rolled like a rom-com montage:

Kitchen Chaos: Kabir tried to help cook but burned the rotis so badly his mother declared, “Beta, tumhare haath se bas Maggi banegi.”

TV Wars: Kabir wanted to watch cricket, Naina wanted her daily soap. They solved it by fighting over the remote every night. Once, Kabir even hid it in the fridge.

Family Drama: Aunties gave unsolicited advice, uncles kept asking, “Bacche kab?” Cousins teased nonstop.

Yet, every small fight ended in laughter, every sulk dissolved with a hug, and every night ended with whispered confessions of love.

One morning, Naina fainted while making chai. Panic exploded in the house.

Doctor visits followed, and soon the news came: "Congratulations, you're going to be parents."

Kabir's jaw dropped. "Parents? Matlab... main papa banne wala hoon? Main toh khud abhi baccha hoon!"

Naina laughed through her tears. "Well, ab tumhe jaldi bada hona padega."

The whole family celebrated like India won the World Cup. Dhol, sweets, even a small puja. Kabir's cousin whispered, "Ab teri masti khatam. Diapers hi diapers."

Kabir became the most overdramatic husband in history:

He wouldn't let Naina lift a spoon. "Tum meri queen ho, spoon tumhe uthana nahi hai!"

He Googled baby names daily and suggested ridiculous ones like "Shaktimaan" and "Ranveer Singh Pant."

He argued with the doctor, "Baby ko butter chicken khilana safe hai na?"

Naina alternated between laughter and exasperation. "Kabir, tum papa banne waale ho, joker nahi."

When the time came, Kabir nearly fainted in the hospital corridor. "Mujhe glucose do, mujhe glucose do!" he cried, while Naina rolled her eyes between contractions.

Finally, a nurse appeared with the tiniest baby wrapped in pink cloth. Kabir froze. His eyes misted instantly.

He held the baby, whispering, “Arre... itni chhoti? Yeh toh mere haath mein hi gayab ho ja rahi hai.”

Naina, exhausted but smiling, said softly, “Meet our little miracle.”

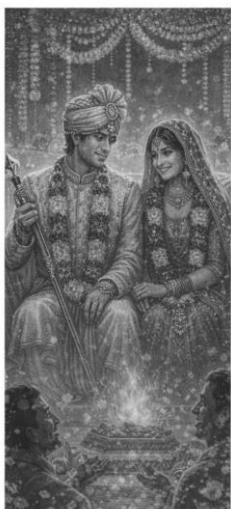
Tears rolled down Kabir’s cheeks. “I swear, I’ll make this kid laugh every single day. Just like I make you laugh.”

Weeks later, the house was filled with baby giggles, toys scattered everywhere, and Kabir singing lullabies horribly off-key.

One night, as Naina watched him cradle their daughter, she whispered, “Kabir... after everything, after Ritika, Riya, the fights, the chaos... this is our happily ever after, isn’t it?”

Kabir kissed the baby’s forehead, then Naina’s hand. “Nahi, dulhanji. This is just the interval. Picture abhi baaki hai.”

And outside, the fireworks of another festival lit the sky—perfectly Bollywood, perfectly them.



Chapter 26

Baby, Baba, and Bollywood Parenting

If Kabir thought marriage was complicated, parenting was an entirely new battlefield.

“Parenting is like Netflix,” he muttered one morning, staring at his wailing daughter. “It’s confusing, there’s too much crying, and you never know what’s coming next.”

Naina rolled her eyes, cradling the baby gently. “Parenting is like real life, Kabir. Not your Netflix binge.”

But even as she said it, she couldn’t hide her smile. Kabir, in his loose pajamas, hair messed up like a rockstar post-concert, was already humming a lullaby that sounded suspiciously like the IPL theme song.

Their daughter, nicknamed Gudiya by the family, had turned their house upside down. Nights were no longer for romance but for midnight feeding sessions, diaper changes, and Kabir pretending to faint every time the baby cried too loudly.

One night, Naina nudged him awake. “Kabir, she’s crying. Your turn.”

Kabir groaned, pulling the pillow over his head. “Naina, I love you... but I think she loves you

more. Let's respect her choice."

"Get up!" Naina snapped.

He staggered to the crib, lifted the baby with the grace of a sack of potatoes, and whispered, "Shh, princess. Papa's here. Don't expose my laziness already."

The baby promptly burped on his shoulder. Kabir froze. "She's... she's spitting on me already? God, she's exactly like you, Naina."

Naina burst out laughing, despite her exhaustion.

As with every Indian baby, Gudiya wasn't just Kabir and Naina's child. She belonged to the entire extended family.

Aunties showed up unannounced with laddoos "for the mother's health." Cousins treated her like a doll. Kabir's mother refused to let anyone else bathe her.

One afternoon, Kabir entered the living room to find five women cooing over the baby while she screamed her lungs out.

"Excuse me," he said, hands on hips. "This is my daughter, not Bigg Boss contestant. Can I get my turn?"

"Shut up, Kabir," one aunty scolded. "Go bring hot water."

Kabir muttered, "I'm just a background dancer in my own movie."

Kabir, determined to be a "cool dad," tried several questionable strategies:

He built a mini cradle out of cricket bats. It collapsed in five minutes.

He played lullabies on his guitar. The baby cried louder until he switched to a Shah Rukh Khan song.

He invented a “dad dance” routine that looked like bhangra on steroids, claiming it soothed her.

Naina caught him once, dancing madly in the living room while the baby giggled. She folded her arms, smirking. “So this is your secret talent? You’ll traumatize her for life.”

Kabir winked. “At least she thinks I’m funny. Unlike you.”

When Gudiya started babbling, the entire family held its breath for her first word.

Kabir knelt dramatically. “Say Papa. Come on, beta. Paa-paa.”

The baby blinked at him, then squealed, “Maa!”

The room erupted in cheers. Kabir clutched his chest. “Betrayal. My own daughter ditched me. This is Ritika and Riya’s fault somehow.”

Naina hugged the baby, laughing. “See? She knows who actually takes care of her.”

Kabir sulked for two days, until Gudiya finally mumbled something resembling “Papa.” Kabir jumped like India had won the World Cup.

Romance didn’t disappear—it transformed.

Once, they tried sneaking out for a late-night drive, leaving the baby with Kabir’s mom. Halfway down the road, Kabir panicked.

“What if she cries? What if she misses us? What if she learns algebra without me?”

Naina smacked his arm. "She's six months old, Kabir!"

They returned in 20 minutes, only to find the baby asleep peacefully. Kabir sighed. "She's already independent. Doesn't need me. Typical."

Still, when Naina leaned her head on his shoulder, whispering, "I missed this," Kabir grinned. "See? You'll never replace me."

The next months played out like a rom-com song montage:

Kabir struggling to change diapers, yelling, "It's a bomb! It's a bomb!"

Naina laughing as the baby splashed water on Kabir during bath time.

Kabir falling asleep with the baby on his chest, Naina clicking secret pictures.

Family gatherings where Kabir used the baby as an excuse to escape boring lectures.

Naina catching Kabir feeding the baby jalebi secretly.

Life was exhausting, messy, and beautiful.

One quiet night, after everyone was asleep, Naina stood by the crib, watching their daughter.

Kabir came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "She looks like you when she sleeps. Peaceful. And like me when she cries—dramatic."

Naina chuckled softly. "Kabir... thank you."

"For what?"

“For growing up. For becoming the man I didn’t know you could be.”

Kabir turned her gently, eyes shimmering. “I didn’t grow up, Naina. I just found someone worth growing up for.”

They kissed, softly, surrounded by the hum of the night and the quiet breathing of their child.

Months later, the family gathered again for Gudiya’s first birthday. The house was decorated like a wedding again, balloons, cakes, music. Kabir held his daughter in one arm, Naina’s hand in the other.

As everyone clapped and sang, Kabir leaned close to Naina. “From carefree bachelor to husband to papa... not bad, huh?”

Naina smiled, eyes glistening. “Not bad at all. In fact, perfect.”

And as fireworks lit the sky once more, Kabir shouted, “Picture abhi khatam ho gayi hai. But the sequel—starring us three—is coming soon!”

The crowd laughed, the baby giggled, and Kabir stole one last filmi twirl with Naina in his arms—because in true Bollywood style, life had given him his forever love story.



Chapter 27

Final Chapter – The Fracture Beneath Forever

The house had finally quieted.

For the first time in months, there were no dhol beats, no aunties arguing over chai, no cousins barging into rooms uninvited. Just silence. A peaceful, comforting silence.

Or at least... it should have been.

Naina stood by the window, gently rocking Gudiya in her arms. The city lights flickered in the distance, soft and distant, like memories she couldn't quite touch anymore.

"Sleep, baby," she whispered, brushing a strand of hair off her daughter's forehead.

Behind her, Kabir lay sprawled on the bed, one arm thrown over his eyes.

"Is she asleep?" he asked lazily.

"Almost," Naina replied softly.

Kabir turned his head, watching them. For a moment, everything looked perfect. The woman he loved. The child they created. The life they had fought for.

Everything he had once thought he wanted.

And yet... something inside him felt unsettled.

It had started subtly. A message.

A name flashing on his phone he hadn't seen in months.

Ritika.

At first, he ignored it.

Then another message came.

"We need to talk."

He shouldn't have replied.

He knew that.

But curiosity... guilt... something unnamed pulled at him.

"About what?"

The reply came instantly.

"Not on text. Meet me."

Kabir had stared at the screen for a long time that day. Then he had locked his phone.

And said nothing.

It was supposed to be quick.

A closure.

That's what he told himself. A café. Neutral ground. No emotions.

But the moment Ritika walked in... something shifted.

She looked different.

Not the confident, untouchable woman from before. There was something... fragile. Tired. Real.

“Kabir,” she said softly.

He nodded. “Why did you call me?”

No small talk. No nostalgia. Straight to the point.

Ritika took a breath. Her fingers trembled slightly on the table.

“I’m pregnant.”

The world stopped. Kabir blinked. “What?”

Her eyes met his. “It’s yours.”

Silence crashed between them. Kabir laughed.

A hollow, disbelieving sound. “That’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking,” Ritika said quietly.

His chest tightened. “When?” he demanded.

Her gaze dropped. “That night... after the sangeet.”

Kabir’s mind spun. The balcony. The conversation.

The moment he had been confused, vulnerable... pulled into something he shouldn’t have allowed.

A mistake. A single, reckless mistake.

But now— “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” his voice cracked.

Ritika’s lips trembled. “Because I thought I could handle it. Alone. Like always.”

She looked up. “But I can’t, Kabir.”

His breath grew heavy.

“And what do you expect me to do?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “But you deserved to know.”

That night, Kabir returned home late. Naina was asleep, Gudiya curled beside her.

He stood at the doorway for a long time. Watching them.

Feeling something inside him break. This... was his life.

This was real.

This was everything he had chosen.

And yet, somewhere in the shadows, another truth now existed.

One he couldn't ignore. One he couldn't undo.

Days passed. Kabir said nothing.

Not to Naina. Not to anyone. But something changed.

He became quieter. Distracted.

His laughter felt forced. His jokes half-hearted.

Naina noticed.

Of course she did.

"Kabir, what's wrong?" she asked one night.

"Nothing," he replied too quickly.

She frowned. "You've been off lately."

"Just work stress," he shrugged.

She didn't believe him. But she let it go. Because love sometimes chooses silence over confrontation.

Ritika didn't push. She didn't call every day. She didn't demand answers.

But she existed. Like a ticking clock. Like a shadow Kabir couldn't escape.

When they met again, it was quieter.

Less emotional. More... real.

"I'm keeping the baby," she said.

Kabir nodded slowly.

"I figured."

She studied his face. "You're married now. I'm not here to destroy that."

He let out a bitter laugh. "Too late for that."

Her voice softened.

"I don't want you back, Kabir."

He looked at her, surprised.

"I just don't want to do this alone."

And that's how it started. Not with passion. Not with love. But with responsibility.

Kabir began meeting Ritika in secret. Doctor visits. Discussions.

Silent moments filled with things unsaid. It wasn't what they once had.

It wasn't romantic. But it was... something dangerous.

Because secrets grow.

And silence feeds them. Naina felt it before she saw it.

The distance.

The hesitation.

The way Kabir's phone would buzz and he'd step away.

The way his eyes sometimes looked... guilty.

One night, she asked again. "Kabir... are you happy?"

The question hit him like a punch. He forced a smile.

"Of course I am."

But his eyes didn't match.

And Naina noticed. Because she always noticed. It happened on an ordinary afternoon.

No drama. No build-up. Just... truth.

Kabir had left his phone on the table. A message popped up.

Ritika: "Doctor confirmed. 12 weeks. We need to talk."

Naina froze. Her fingers trembled as she picked up the phone.

She shouldn't look. She knew she shouldn't.

But something inside her already knew.

And when she opened the chat... Her world shattered.

Kabir returned home that evening, humming absentmindedly.

"Naina?" he called.

No answer. He stepped into the living room.

She was there. Sitting still.

His phone in her hand. His heart stopped.

"Naina..."

She looked up. Her eyes were dry. Too dry.

"How long?" she asked quietly.

Kabir couldn't speak.

"How long, Kabir?" His silence was the answer.

"You promised me," her voice broke.

"You stood in front of everyone and chose me!"

"I did," he said helplessly.

"Then what is this?" she shouted, holding up the phone.

He ran a hand through his hair. "It was a mistake—"

"A mistake?" she laughed bitterly. "Mistakes don't last 12 weeks, Kabir!"

He stepped forward. "Naina, please—"

"Don't," she stepped back. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Is it yours?"

The silence was enough. She closed her eyes. And something inside her... broke completely.

"I'm leaving," she said finally.

Kabir's chest tightened.

"No—"

"I stayed when I was scared," she continued. "I chose you when everything told me not to."

Her eyes met his. "But I won't stay where I'm not respected."

He reached for her. "I love you, Naina."

Tears finally fell. "Love isn't enough anymore."

That night, Naina packed again. Just like she had once before.
But this time... she didn't stop.

Gudiya slept peacefully, unaware of the storm. Kabir stood in
the doorway.

Helpless. Broken. Watching everything slip away.

At dawn, Naina stood at the door. Suitcase beside her.

Child in her arms. Kabir's voice cracked.

"Please don't go."

She looked at him. The same man she had once chosen. The
same man she had built a life with.

And now...

The same man who had broken it.

"I loved you," she said softly. Then she turned. And walked
away.

Months later.

A hospital room. A baby cried. Ritika lay back, exhausted.
Kabir stood beside her, holding the newborn in his arms.

His second child. His second life.

But his heart...

Was somewhere else.

Far away. With a woman who no longer belonged to him.

Some love stories don't end. They fracture... And the pieces?

They come back sharper than before.

Madness Chaos Will Continue.....

